

Thomas M. Menino, Mayor
The Boston Schoolyard Initiative A Public / Private Partnership

Designing Schoolyards & Building Community



The Boston Schoolyards Initiative

Mission

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative is dedicated
to transforming Boston's schoolyards
into dynamic centers for learning and community life.
It accomplishes this goal through a public/private partnership
that promotes sustainable development, experiential education,
open space stewardship and enlightened public policy.
In the process of designing and building schoolyards,
the Initiative is also building communities and
providing a viable model for schoolyard development
that can be replicated in cities and towns across America.

Boston Schoolyard Initiative Partners

City of Boston Partners

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative is a public/private partnership in the truest sense of the term. The City of Boston, under the direction of Mayor Thomas M. Menino, has committed major capital funding and tremendous energy to reclaiming the City's schoolyards. City staff manage projects from design through construction and ongoing maintenance. City of Boston partners in the Initiative include:

Mayor Thomas M. Menino	Edward Ingersoll Browne Fund
Boston Public School Department	Boston Community Centers
Boston Department of Neighborhood Development	Boston Parks & Recreation Department
Boston Basic City Services	

Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative

The Initiative's private sector partners work closely with the City to issue Requests for Proposals and award grants through the Boston Schoolyards Funders Collaborative. The Collaborative, jointly with the City, establishes policy for the Initiative and oversees budgets and work-plans. To facilitate the funding process, a special "Fund for Boston Schoolyards," was established by a diverse group of funders at the Boston Foundation to be a 'one-stop shopping' place for schoolyard groups seeking financial support. The Collaborative's foundation and community members are:

Paul & Edith Babson Foundation	Hyde Square Task Force
The Boston Foundation	Herman & Frieda Miller Foundation
Boston Foundation for Architecture	Neighborhood of Affordable Housing
Boston Globe Foundation	Nellie Mae Foundation
Citywide Parents Council	The New England
Clipper Ship Foundation	The Philanthropic Initiative
Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust	Harold Whitworth Pierce Charitable Trust
Charles Hayden Foundation	Polaroid Foundation
George B. Henderson Foundation	State Street Foundation
Holland Elementary School	Anna B. Stearns Charitable Foundation
Hyams Foundation	



Dear Friends:

Here in Boston, we are working hard to ensure that all of our young people receive a quality education. One of our strongest programs is the Boston Schoolyard Initiative. This public/private partnership with the Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative rebuilds our neighborhood schoolyards so they are returned to productive use after school hours and can



become an integral part of the learning process during the school day.

Since 1995, the Boston Schoolyard Initiative has been transforming schoolyards into active centers for schools and neighborhoods.

Schools across our City have formed partnerships with community-based educational institutions, local non-profits, philanthropic organizations, parents, teachers and other community stakeholders. They are using this unique opportunity to combine recreation, creative play and academic learning. Some schoolyards have created outdoor amphitheatres, nature trails, play structures, painted solar systems and maps.

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative was awarded the James C. Howland Gold Medal for Urban Enrichment in the year 2000. It continues to strengthen our schools and our neighborhoods. I am proud of the Schoolyard Initiative's great success.

Thomas M. Menino
Mayor of Boston



Imagine a classroom with sky for a ceiling and earth for a floor. A room without walls or desks, where young scientists explore the world of bugs; mathematicians measure rainfall; budding writers record their observations; and actors rehearse on a natural stage. In this classroom, custodians exchange pruning tips with parents; neighbors pause to talk with each other; and teachers think ‘outside the box,’ as they turn schoolyards into laboratories for experiential learning.

In 1995, these beguiling scenes played only in the imagination of a small but determined group of Boston environmentalists, educators and city officials. This group saw the City’s schoolyards not as the wastelands of cracked asphalt they appeared to be, but as 250 acres of prime urban open space ripe for transformation.

The group’s vision and tenacity led to the creation of the Boston Schoolyard Initiative in 1995. The Initiative is a public/private partnership of the City of Boston, under the leadership of Mayor Thomas M. Menino, and a group of private sector philanthropies called the Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative.

In less than six years, approximately half of the City’s public schools and every neighborhood in Boston are participating in the Initiative. And, thanks to an inclusive community design process aimed at uniting school and neighborhood, an infrastructure exists that will sustain schoolyard programming and maintenance for decades to come.

Throughout Boston, outdoor classrooms are being woven into the core curricula of participating schools. And schoolyards are being used not only for educational purposes, but also for a host of other activities, including before- and after-school programs, summer camps, and gathering places for local residents.

As a result, Boston has become an acknowledged leader in the emerging field of sustainable schoolyard development. This publication is designed to share some of the lessons learned by the Boston Schoolyard Initiative, as it moves toward a day when every schoolyard in the City is not only a place of learning, but also a powerful vehicle for building community.

City of Neighborhoods

Boston is a city of neighborhoods and a city of 'firsts'. Boston had not only the first public school system in the United States, but also the first park system. It is only fitting, then, that Boston should become a leader in the movement to reclaim this country's schoolyards.

In 1994, a group called the Urban Land Use Task Force, funded by Boston area foundations, held a series of meetings to discuss the City's open spaces. In short order, the need for "clean, safe and green" schoolyards moved to the very top of the Task Force's agenda.



Although ad hoc groups had organized a few schoolyard projects, their efforts had taken years to reach fruition and suffered from a severe lack of capital funding. Small grants provided by the Boston Foundation through a grassroots organization called the Boston GreenSpace Alliance were helpful, but not enough.

The Task Force approached Boston Mayor Thomas M. Menino with their concerns about the condition of these underutilized and promising open spaces. The Mayor, impressed with the commitment of the private sector and local activists, responded by forming a cabinet-level mayoral task force to review the issue. The Schoolyard Task Force, made up of a broad cross-section of concerned citizens across the City, met for six months before presenting their unanimous recommendations to the Mayor. With the Mayor's enthusiastic support, the result was the creation of the Boston Schoolyard Initiative in 1995.

Local and Participatory

The Task Force’s recommendations went beyond the creation of the Initiative itself and emphasized the importance of making all of the schoolyard projects local and participatory. Its members felt strongly that schoolyards should be developed through grassroots efforts, involving community residents and youth. To encourage this, they suggested establishing a competitive grantmaking program that would reward projects which were inclusive of all potential stakeholders — including every child and every adult who would benefit from the development of a schoolyard in their neighborhood.

The Task Force developed four major components, including:

A partnership approach, in which plans for each schoolyard are developed from a shared vision of the school and the community;

An outdoor education model, that targets public school students as well as neighborhood youth and community residents;

A maintenance strategy, with the City of Boston providing basic maintenance, and school and community partners assuming responsibility for schoolyard enhancements; and

An approach to funding that involves a combination of public and private support.

“Schools cannot survive in isolation. Bringing the broader community into the school community reinforces our mission and gives it the leverage it needs to become a reality. The Boston Schoolyard Initiative is a proven vehicle for this coming together.”

Dr. Thomas Payzant, Superintendent,
Boston Public Schools

When Process Becomes Product

While the most obvious product of any schoolyard project is the newly constructed schoolyard itself, a less tangible but equally important product is the process that moves the project forward. If done thoughtfully, the process of building and maintaining schoolyards can play a vital role in the revitalization of entire neighborhood. For the Boston Schoolyard Initiative, the process is defined by four phases:

Community Organizing

In order to build a strong local constituency for each schoolyard, every potential

user and stakeholder is invited into the process at the earliest possible stage. This includes most especially each school's students, but also parents, educators, administrators, custodians, before and after school programs, summer camps, local merchants and business partners, crime watch groups, senior citizen groups, community-based organizations and neighborhood residents.

Together, these stakeholders attend a series of community meetings to assess local needs, develop a consensus about the design of capital improvements, raise funds, and consider how to create



JULIE STONE

a system that will support sustainable schoolyard development. Privately funded Planning Grants are awarded to schoolyard groups to underwrite the hiring of a community organizer who will facilitate this two-year process.

Designing Improvements

When the schoolyard group has met to discuss general issues and concerns, a project manager from the Department of Neighborhood Development is assigned to the group, and participants meet to select a landscape architect contracted by the City of Boston. The architect then works closely with the group to translate its vision into a Master Plan, which reflects both immediate construction plans as well as possible future construction. During this process, technical assistance is provided to schoolyard groups, building on a base of knowledge that grows with each project that is completed.

Construction

Working with City staff, the schoolyard group approves and prioritizes its Master Plan, construction documents are approved by the City's Department of Neighborhood Development and the Boston School Department, and put out to public bid. Local volunteers are encouraged to participate in "Community Build Days," as a way to keep construction costs down and foster a strong sense of local schoolyard owner-

ship the City of Boston has committed over \$2 million a year to fund capital improvements.

Sustainability Through Ongoing Programming and Maintenance

If the process has been successful to this point, a "Friends of the Schoolyard" group will have formed with the dedication, knowledge and capacity to help maintain capital improvements, imple-



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Schoolyards and Public Art

Schoolyards are unique public spaces. Many schoolyard groups have sought to create "signature" elements in their renovation projects, which highlight the schoolyard's integral connection to the culture of the community at large. The Edward Ingersoll Browne Fund, and others, have played a key role in providing the funds necessary to work with professional artists and landscape architects in creating ornamental gateways, sculptures, art fences and child-inspired graphics which add a distinctive touch to these important neighborhood spaces.

What is a Schoolyard?

A schoolyard is a school's 'external environment', whether large or small, beautiful or unsightly, actively used or completely abandoned.

Whatever its condition, a schoolyard is an indicator of the health of the surrounding community, and each has a powerful impact on the other.

An unimproved or degraded schoolyard sends a negative message about the school and the neighborhood in which it is situated.

A dynamic and active schoolyard adds to the vibrancy of both.

ment ongoing programs — both in and out of schools — and, ultimately, ensure schoolyard sustainability.

To maintain schoolyards over time, the Office of Facilities Management of the Boston Public Schools and the Boston Schoolyard Funders Collabora-

tive developed a “Shared Maintenance Protocol,” which is tailored to specific sites. The Protocol is then maintained by school custodial staffs in concert with Friends groups and a specially trained union crew whose primary job is to travel from site to site implementing the Protocol. Additional funding is available at this stage in the form of maintenance/ sustainability grants to Friends groups that have successfully completed the construction phase.

In scores of neighborhoods, this process of reclaiming Boston's schoolyards has been tested, refined and reaffirmed. As a result, Boston's schools — and the neighborhoods in which they reside — have closer, more reciprocal, and more meaningful relationships than ever before.



KIRK MEYER

Grounds for Learning

Across the United States and around the world, educators are recognizing the importance of outdoor learning to both formal and informal education. While most public education in the United States takes place in classrooms — and in the minds of students — related studies reveal that all children benefit from

A Tree Grows in Roxbury

One of the most effective “laboratories for learning” to emerge from the Boston Schoolyard Initiative is the schoolyard arboretum at the Nathan Hale Elementary School in Roxbury. Working closely with staff from Harvard University’s Arnold Arboretum, students at the Hale were involved at the earliest possible stage of the project, learning about a wide variety of trees and voting on which ones to plant in the arboretum. (The number one vote getter was the Sugar Maple.) Today, the partnership between the Hale and Arnold Arboretum continues by combining schoolyard observation with an innovative website dedicated to the seasonal study of trees. The Hale arboretum was cited when the Boston Schoolyard Initiative received an award from the Boston GreenSpace Alliance for its important work restoring and preserving open spaces throughout Boston.

‘hands-on’ learning, and that some children actually require experiential learning to reach their full potential.

One of the most important lessons learned by the Boston Schoolyard Initiative since its inception in 1995 is that the potential for schoolyards to become dynamic places for outdoor education is virtually unlimited.

The Initiative takes a broad-based approach to education. It encourages the design of multi-use spaces that lend themselves to instruction in all



JERRY HOWARD/WALLACE FLOYD DESIGN GROUP

subjects and meet the social and recreational needs of students. In its sixth year of operation, the Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative added an Education Specialist to its staff, underscoring its commitment to working closely with educators, administrators and policy makers to maximize the use of outdoor classrooms for teaching and learning.

The improvements to our schoolyard have made teaching and learning more interesting. In fact, attendance is better on days when classes are scheduled outside – for both students and faculty!

**Dr. Domenic Amara, Principal,
Warren-Prescott Elementary School**



Community-Based Education Reform

All schoolyards have the potential to positively influence learning in three primary areas:

Recreation and Physical Education Play structures, physical challenge courses, and properly maintained fields and courts can give students opportunities to develop motor skills, improve overall physical fitness, and release pent-up energy. All of these activities lead directly to healthier students with improved self-esteem and the heightened ability to focus on the educational experiences that take place inside school walls.

Social Development Part of any learning process involves teaching young people how to function in group settings. In well-designed and monitored school-

Multidisciplinary Education

The idea of using the schoolyard as an integrated context for multidisciplinary learning is sparking excitement among educators around the world, but very limited research has been conducted to inform curriculum development or test approaches. The Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative is working closely with Education Development Center, a global research and development firm, to compile information on schoolyard teaching and learning around the world. This work already has included an exhaustive literature search as well as the distribution of a special survey to hundreds of educators. Preliminary analysis indicates a variety of ad hoc approaches coupled with a great deal of interest and enthusiasm. The information that emerges from this work will be of use not only to the Boston Schoolyard Initiative, but also to educators and city planners across the country.

yards, students have opportunities to form groups, reach consensus, and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills with their peers.



KIRK MEYER



JULIE STONE

Academic Learning The Schoolyard offers students and teachers a “laboratory” in which to work directly with the phenomena they are studying. Rather than learning about clouds, weather patterns, light and shadow, water, air quality or trees from textbooks alone, students are able to conduct in-depth investigations through direct observation, data collection and analysis. Integrating outdoor study into the core curriculum offers students direct, hands-on experience and “real world” applications.

Teacher Support

The Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative provides funding and support for professional development opportunities, outdoor classroom materials, curriculum development and collaborative projects. The Education Director works with teachers to promote collaboration among participating schools, and to develop partnerships between schools and community groups, cultural institutions and informal science education centers.

“The Boston Schoolyard Initiative is an example of community-driven education reform.”

A Boston Public School Parent and Schoolyard Group Member



KIRK MEYER

Educational Partners

The Initiative helps develop partnerships between community-based groups and participating schools that extend the use of the schoolyard for formal and informal education. Selected partners have included:

- Annenberg Math & Science Project
- Arnold Arboretum at Harvard University
- Boston Recycling Office
- Boston Society of Architects' Learning By Design Program
- Boston Urban Gardeners
- Children's Museum
- City Year
- Dunn Foundation
- Eagle Eye Institute
- Earthworks
- Garden Futures
- Greater Boston Urban Resources Partnership
- Impact II at School-To-Career
- Massachusetts Audubon Society's Boston Nature Center
- Massachusetts Dept. of Environmental Management's Urban Forestry Program
- Massachusetts Horticultural Society
- Massachusetts Water Resources Authority
- USDA Forestry Service
- YouthBuild

Sharing the Boston Model

When the Boston Schoolyard Initiative began its work in 1995, a survey of Boston's 128 public schoolyards revealed an appallingly neglected patchwork of broken pavements, torn fences, compacted soil and hazardous play equipment. Degraded school grounds had contributed to a sense of malaise and urban blight throughout the City. Most alarmingly, their poor condition was sending messages to students and to all local youth that they were simply not a priority.

Today, negative conditions and messages have been replaced by a new era of hope. Renovated, attractive and useful schoolyards are acting as positive "tipping points" for the revitalization of entire communities; and negative attitudes have been replaced by feelings of excitement and optimism.

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative's comprehensive and integrated approach to community development, educational innovation, and environmental stewardship is strengthening the fabric of Boston's neighborhoods and empowering residents. The work of scores of schoolyard groups is supporting teachers and sending a new message to students — that schoolyards are safe places, special places, even fun places.

Today, the Boston model is being shared with teachers, principals, city planners and others throughout the country and abroad. Schoolyards are being acknowledged as some of this country's most important urban open spaces. Centrally located, accessible to neighborhood residents and integrated into public school systems, newly constructed schoolyards are becoming grounds for celebration and hope — not only in Boston but in all communities that are beginning see their schoolyards as valuable educational resources — and as promises waiting to be kept.

In 2000, the Boston Schoolyard Initiative won the Gold Medal James C. Howland Award for Urban Enrichment (for cities with populations larger than 500,000), and the Faces of GreenSpace Award from the Boston GreenSpace Alliance

For more information about how to learn from the Boston model, contact