Using Public-Private Partnerships to Improve Public Schoolyards and Playgrounds: A Manual for Community Groups

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Introduction

This manual outlines steps for developing schoolyards, playgrounds, parks and other open spaces using private-public partnerships and community based participatory processes. The goals of this manual are to encourage other encourage others to embark upon similar projects and provide guidance to groups seeking to improve their communities. The manual builds upon the experience of a private-public partnership in Boston, but should be applicable to other areas

This manual grew out of a review of the Boston Schoolyard Initiative (BSI), which since 1994 has transformed 75 neglected schoolyards into well-designed, sustainable, and, above all, usable open spaces that are accessible to people of all ages. (See, www.schoolyards.org). BSI is a public private partnership that is supported by the City of Boston through a collaborative overseeing foundation support and funds raised from local initiatives. The schoolyard sites are located across Boston's diverse neighborhoods, including its most economically distressed communities, where the students tend to be low-income or working-class and mostly Black and Latino and other students of color. The final designs of these renovated schoolyards have varied and have included everything from passive recreation spaces to outdoor classrooms that assist in science education and teaching writing skills. Most contain play equipment; many have renewed grass and areas for extensive physical activity. The schoolyards have become important green spaces for their home neighborhoods, not just the particular public school.

As part of the case study of the BSI strategy, we interviewed and conducted focus groups with participants, including school principals; representatives from the City of Boston; community partners; representatives from school-based planning teams, including several BSI community organizers; and also neighbors who live near the schoolyard or use it. Based upon the information gathered from these interviews and through other data sources, we have put together this manual for other communities interested in similar types of projects.

We begin with some of the key findings and lessons learned about the BSI. These lessons are the basis for the proposed guideposts regarding the planning of schoolyard transformation projects, a summary of the kinds of obstacles which might arise in the early stages; the stages in implementation of initiatives; and a few thoughts about how to approach the evaluation of initiatives. It should be emphasized that this manual does not focus on fundraising for these kinds of initiatives. The BSI would not have been possible without government, foundation, and private sector resources. But the manual might be useful, nevertheless, as a guide for community groups who might be in the position to receive funding for similar initiatives, or at least as a basis for initiating dialogue with potential funders.

The BSI experience illustrates three key findings: first, that when a range of stakeholders -- including teachers, staff, parents, government representatives and neighborhood residents -- work together, they can produce meaningful change in the

public school environment in a way that adds value to the school and the community. Second, BSI provides evidence that schoolyard projects can be used to develop and sustain civic relationships involving public schools and other sectors of the community. And third, while funding for the BSI initiative was important to the project's success, it was the ability of the various stakeholders to work together effectively on behalf of individual schoolyards that has been most responsible for the project's success.

In an earlier study, *After-School Programs for Low-Income Children: Promise and Challenges*, the urban planner, Robert Halpern, concluded that schoolyards and after-school programs have a growing importance in the overall effectiveness of schools. He identified four main factors behind this growing attention:

(1) a belief that streets and playgrounds are no longer safe for children
(2) the concern that children find it stressful to be alone after school and do not use the time productively
(3) the recognition that after-school hours can provide the time and individual attention that many children need to master basic academic skills
(4) the conviction that low-income children deserve the same opportunities in sports, arts, and other activities as higher-income children.

As suggested in the Halpern and other studies, there is a growing focus on schoolyards as a key component for quality schooling and public safety in urban and low-income areas. This continuing attention, however, is not yet matched with ample recording of insights and lessons that parents, teachers, and community leaders can tap to replicate this kind of initiative.

In response to a vacuum of information for practitioners in this area, the purpose of this web-based manual is to provide a road map for the successful redevelopment of schoolyards in low-income and urban communities. With this manual, we hope to provide a step-by-step map for community groups, school representatives, city officials, organizers, and others hoping to transform their schoolyards through civic participation and public/private partnerships.

We hope that this manual will serve as tools for a wide range of people—in the public and private sectors, the media, and philanthropic organizations—who are interested in developing a collaborative, broad-based approach to schoolyard and playground renovations. In addition to planners and community organizers, hopefully the manual will prove useful for representatives from schools and city government, not-for-profit and community-based organizations, foundations and other groups concerned with local environmental and health issues, and neighborhood organizations and institutions looking to improve their local communities.

This manual includes detailed descriptions of the activities necessary to bring together multiple stakeholders in a collaborative development process. It is organized by the following sections:

- Introduction
- The Value of Active Living Environments
- Developing Plans and Program Planning
- From Plan to Implementation
- Sustainability and Evaluation

The conclusion includes a select bibliography for readers interested additional information or further reading sources. This manual is based on a review of more than 75 sites in Boston, and it draws together common issues, problems, and resolutions found there. However, these issues and solutions are likely to be found in a wide range of urban areas in the United States. The goal of this manual is to inspire other communities to launch and complete their own projects, learning along the way from the Boston experience.

This manual alone is not enough to successfully reconstruct a new playground or schoolyard. Ultimately, a project needs committed volunteers, enlightened public agencies, and a commitment of funding for construction and maintenance. It also needs political and civic support. For example, over its 10-year existence, BSI has received $24 million total from both public and private sources, and has had the strong support of foundations and the mayor's office. Perhaps as many as 1000 people have been involved in planning its individual projects. In addition, a thoughtful and comprehensive planning framework, one that is careful to incorporate community stakeholders throughout its process, is critical.

The success of BSI demonstrates that a collaborative process involving parents, community residents, school personnel, city administrations, private funders, and other stakeholders can work together to improve urban open spaces and maintain them for future generations. The renovated schoolyards bring far more benefits than just better grounds on which students can play. They offer options for hands-on learning in outdoor classrooms that can lead to improved class activities and school performance. Overall, the integration of community development with educational innovation, the stewardship of local green space, and greater involvement of residents can strengthen a community.

The value of active living environments

Physical activity, of course, is vital for health. While perhaps a bit trite as a statement, it is nevertheless important to repeat during a time when the United States is facing an epidemic of obesity. By 2005, nearly 25% of all adults were obese, and another 33% were overweight. Childhood obesity rates are also high; in 2003 about 20% of children were overweight or obese. Both childhood and adult obesity have jumped dramatically since the mid-1980s, suggesting that the causes of this sudden change are not inherited but are related to changes in diet and exercise.

Physical activity can help people lower their weight and prevent obesity. Studies have shown that physical activity can also reduce heart disease, prevent diabetes and strokes, delay the onset of cognitive decline in older people, and prevent certain cancers. Increased physical activity can benefit children by helping them develop greater self-esteem and a sense of community, improving their health, and creating an environment which could possibly facilitate academic achievement and motivation.

Guidelines from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), published in 2008, suggest that adults less than 65 years should exercise at least 5 hours moderately or 2.5 hours vigorously each week. Children and adolescents should exercise for at least an hour every day. Seniors should have at least 2.5 hours of moderate or 1.75 hours of vigorous physical activity each week.

Parks and playgrounds that are safe, well designed, and well maintained can make it much easier for people of all ages living in urban communities to exercise. While people will travel long distances to reach major parks and recreational areas, most children and adults are not comfortable walking more than about a quarter to a half mile to a park, or about a 5- to 10-minute walk. Therefore, available, safe, and clean local green space is particularly important in helping maintain a healthy level of physical activity in some areas where access to other places by private or public transportation might be limited. Different communities and groups of people need different kinds of parks. The ways that people use parks can also vary by sex, race, and ethnicity. In some places a schoolyard might be one of only a few usable public open places and therefore, should reflect the potential interests of a broad range of local groups: students, parents, teachers and staff, and, youth and elderly living in the community. Schoolyards should be designed in ways that can address a community's diverse needs and accommodate how those needs may change over time. While young children might need playgrounds with climbing equipment and other age-appropriate play features, older children and teens might benefit more from playing fields, and seniors might prefer open space where they can walk and exercise without having to maneuver among sports' games.

Because so many different interests -- from children's needs to that of the elderly, or teenagers, to those of educators and community leaders, can come together in schoolyards, these open spaces are an ideal place to ignite and nurture community collaboration. While the space around many schools might at one time have been

simply an afterthought on the part of educators and civic leaders, today there should be greater attention on how that space is designed and used. Schoolyards are spaces where school personnel, essential for any successful school-based initiative, can learn about the community and about life outside the classroom. Schools and their open spaces can boost a neighborhood by showcasing the ways that it prioritizes its children and their education, or they can reinforce the feeling of abandonment in many urban neighborhoods by reflecting a continuing pattern of disinvestment and decline.

When a community comes together to revitalize its schoolyards, that process can help to corral a range of local resources and can have a positive effect on the community's overall development. The very organizing process can help build bridges between schools and their communities and bring a renewed focus on the environmental challenges that confront urban neighborhoods.

There are fundamental steps should be taken when building a public/private partnership. These steps can be the basis for improving schoolyards, in part, by providing a foundation for funding and government support. The next section describes some basic lessons, dos and don'ts, for creating and sustaining partnerships among school leaders, teachers, parents, and community and government representatives.

The success of any collaborative and community-based venture depends on communication. From the start of a project, individuals and groups interested in improving a schoolyard should clearly state its goals, including the purpose and mission of the collaboration. A sample mission statement might be worded as follows:

> *The mission of this initiative is to build a coalition of parents, teachers and staff, community and business representatives, and local government in order to: a) improve the physical appearance and safety of schoolyard X;* and, *b) plan for the use of this space in ways that guarantee healthy and educational experiences and recreation for children and their families.*

This kind of mission statement may point to many different goals, but its brevity and conciseness helps to guide the work that is to follow as well as communicate to others who have not been active participants the values of the group.

The development of a schoolyard affects a wide range of people within a local area. These include the core of people actively involved in the design of the project, the end users of the projects, and the neighbors to a project. All groups must be kept informed and involved. It is important to communicate the importance of the projects to community members in the coalition and those outside it. One significant barrier in building coalitions, however, can be differing views of recreation. For example, some people who do not value exercise may view spending time and money on transforming schoolyard space as a waste of money, especially when schools lack other necessities, such as books and after-school programs. Others may be skeptical that the community

can succeed in improving the play areas. The condition of their community's schoolyards and playgrounds may reflect years, if not decades, of neglect.

These kinds of concerns may be relieved if the public can learn about ways that schoolyards and playgrounds can benefit children's education as well as enhance public health. But natural skepticism must also be overcome with concrete results. It is important to show to the skeptics that change is coming. Along this line of thought, rather than responding to those who aren't participating by saying that if they really cared, then they would make the sacrifice, it's better to find other ways people can participate in project planning process. It might be helpful to create a website or an email list that can be used to send out information even to those who can not or will not attend the meetings themselves. That kind of communication can make them feel part of a process that will encourage current or future participation in any schoolyard initiative.

People participate in civic activities for a range of reasons, and it's important to understand those motives in order to create appropriate incentives. Let's be honest, the representatives of public agencies and many of the formal organizations involved with the organizing process are being paid for doing their job. They may be committed to a particular cause and they might claim that they would even do it for free, but their saying they would have volunteered if they had not been paid is not useful for trying to draw neighborhood people into a community initiative. Certainly the incentives need not revolve around compensation, but there must be a clear benefit for community members who are not being paid. These or other incentives should be concrete—such as awards, certificates of thanks, press releases, and so on—and they should be made clear early on in the process.

The time-frames necessary for participation must be clear and concrete. Community members often don't realize that it can take 18 to 24 months to transform schoolyards. Everyone should be told early on how much time may be required of potential partners and stakeholders. Community members and all involved parties need to understand that from beginning to end, the process will be long, and set-backs will happen but, as mentioned above, they may be important for future victories.

In summary, the experiences associated with the Boston Schoolyard Initiative project suggest several important lessons that are applicable to other communities working to implement their own improvements. These include:

Lesson One: Public support depends on the different stakeholders sharing mutual interests.

The goals and objectives of the initiative must be clear and concise, but even more important, they must reflect the civic and community agendas of the stakeholders involved in the partnership. Determining these agendas requires organizing meetings which should be held early with local business leaders, for example, to explain that a safe schoolyard is good for business; with faith-based sector organizations who see a

social benefit for their own members; and with representatives of various government agencies who might be able to help address the concerns of other communities or assist with the government permitting process. Very importantly, these meetings must also represent a commitment to listening to the concerns and ideas of these interests.

School leaders and teachers often are on board for this kind of project, but their support should not be assumed. They, too, have to be reached in order to make sure that they see their own professional agendas reflected in the physical improvement of schoolyards. Perhaps parents already understand the importance of schoolyards for their children, but there is still need for greater understanding of the policy implications associated with an established aim of improving these kinds of spaces. There are other groups that may need to be included in the process such as foundations, service organizations, neighborhood health centers, community development corporations and others.

These groups have different kinds of resources or experiences to contribute to the project. It would be wise to develop individual communication with people and organizations identified as key for the success of the initiative. This can take much time and effort, but investing in communicating with all potential stakeholders at this early stage can help the project overcome barriers that may arise later in the planning process.

Creating a statement of goals and objectives early, and which reflects the mission of the initiative (see above), offers an opportunity to build a foundation for collaboration. A statement of goals for a collaborative schoolyard program might be worded as follows:

- *The program will involve a partnership between school and community participants and leaders*

- *The program design of the schoolyard will facilitate its use for multiple purposes*

- *The city and community will bear joint responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of the schoolyards*

- *Funding for the schoolyards will be pursued in the public and private sectors*

Establishing goals is important because in addition to providing a broad framework and boundaries for action, they can serve to help resolve disputes later in the process and contribute to bringing others into the developing coalition.

It should be noted, however, that by themselves, goals can be quite vague; they need to be associated with specific and concrete objectives explaining how the goals will be met. Objectives can then facilitate the development and refinement of

performance criteria to determine the extent to which they are met, or satisfied. Examples of just one, hypothetical objective linked to the first goal above, might be: *the partnership will reach out to neighborhood organizations and faith organizations, and businesses, to share information about the mission; the outreach will be based on community meetings, or focus groups, or meetings with elected officials.* It is up to the planners and participants to outline what might be specific and concrete objectives for the goals they establish around a particular schoolyard site.

Lesson Two: Get to know the community.

It's important to include representatives reflecting the community's diversity of race, gender, and social class. The planning team and key partners also have to reflect racial and ethnic diversity. The racial and ethnic composition of the team may be symbolic, but could affects directly or indirectly issues of legitimacy and trust in some communities.

Even this kind of representation, however, cannot guarantee that the community will overcome any identity boundaries, support wholeheartedly the initiative, or participate broadly in it. A commitment to diversity and broad democratic planning must be substantive, and not merely symbolic. Simply to proclaim that everyone is invited does not necessarily respond to racial and ethnic divisions which might inhibit broad participation. It would be a mistake to assume that meetings reflecting racial and social diversity alone can guarantee trust among the partners and stakeholders. Well-intentioned planners certainly have been caught by surprise by the mistrust that was played out in racial and ethnic terms, even after they had devoted much attention to ensuring that meetings and activities reflect a community's diversity. While respecting racial and ethnic diversity is a critical first step towards building trust across these lines, there is no guarantee that these efforts will succeed. Celebrating and building on the strengths inherent in diversity is a long process.

In socially and racially diverse communities, the way that meetings are structured and the spaces where they are held should reflect support for the idea that respecting and appreciating diversity is important for the project. Calling a meeting, for example, where there are no opportunities for participants to help mold, or participate in decision-making, or even to have decision-making power, may be perceived as non-supportive of the community's diversity.

In addition to taking the make-up of the community into account, organizers should also be aware of its history. Many communities may contain diverse groups that, although they live near each other, have not worked together in the past. Often, older disputes can intrude on new initiatives. No single project can mitigate or erase the results of these local histories, but an understanding past events can assist project planning to avoid repeating and re-opening these controversies.

In Boston, the BSI successfully met the challenges posed by diversity in the city's neighborhoods by prioritizing their children. BSI staff and community partners

understood that one belief that all communities shared was that their children's health and future was very important. Keeping the needs of children in clear sight helped keep projects on track.

The diversity of the communities also proved to be an asset to the projects. Schoolyards are places where diverse groups of people will interact, so bringing together different facets of the communities to plan the projects helped to draw the communities together in ways that persisted once the project was completed.

Lesson Three: Don't think in terms of concrete victories and losses.

In any community-based process, victories and losses often go hand in hand for a while. Indeed, in some situations, what appear to be losses in moving a particular agenda item forward could very well lay the foundation for future success and victory. If stakeholders only think in absolute terms—seeing what appear to be successes and failures as completely separate— they could fail to anticipate future opportunities as well as problems. For example, if they overreact to a short-term set-back, they could become cynical and lose interest in participating in the project. Similarly, if they believe that a small victory is larger than it is, then they might not anticipate future set-backs, no matter how minor.

Budget constraints were a major roadblock in the implementation of BSI projects. Rarely could available funds meet all the needs and wishes of the groups designing the playgrounds. As will be described below, these constraints often became known only when a design had been finalized to the extent that costs were being assigned to plan elements. But unknown to participants, the very act of group designing of playgrounds had fortified the cooperative spirit of the design team and provided a resilience that helped the groups, and their constituents, manage the final cost cutting process.

Lesson Four: Appreciation and tapping of existing collaborations among stakeholders is an invaluable resource.

Collaborative relationships and initiatives between city and neighborhood organizations, the school, and the private sector provide a foundation upon which to build networks and new partnerships, and they can guarantee the presence of people with experiences and insights critical to the project. However, while existing collaborations inside and across neighborhoods can provide key opportunities, they should not be regarded as providing the only opportunities. They may prove to be inclusive of new voices and new ideas, or not, depending on past and current group dynamics. The coalition should decide whether existing collaborations fairly represent new residents or even residents who have lived in the neighborhood but, for whatever reasons, have not been included.

Many communities can undergo extensive demographic change over a relatively brief period of time, particularly those with large numbers of young children. A coalition developed relatively recently can be out of date given how quickly new families can

move into a community. Thus it is imperative that newcomers to a community be welcomed into the group planning process.

Lesson Five: Planning of discussions and deliberations, and debates, within the community should reflect fair governance.

The coalition should agree on a process for how opinions will be stated and responded to and how disagreements might be resolved or at least managed. People should also be aware that governance should remain a tool for effective and participatory deliberation and not become an ideology, which can actually discourage debate and close an important discussion. The purpose of planning meetings is not to model Roberts Rules of Order, but rather to move an initiative forward. Again, the final goal of the process, a rejuvenated playspace for children and the community, must always be kept in clear view.

Lesson Six: Planners and organizers should be sensitive to class-based differences in neighborhoods.

Some residents will find it easier than others if they do not have job constraints; or if they have resources to pay for child care services; or if they can invest the time necessary to read and learn about the particular schoolyard issues at hand. Similarly, some may have less flexibility about attending meetings than others because of their jobs and work situations. A lack of participation may reflect not a lack of interest in the project but rather the pressures of jobs, family, or other responsibilities This is why, precisely, it is important to offer varied meeting times and locations, early and continuing notification, and continual outreach and other opportunities for participation through letters, email, public schools, and if possible, phone calls.

Developing Plans and Program Planning

The process outlined in the next section is an overview of the legal and regulatory framework and process that guides the redevelopment of most publicly owned facilities. This section outlines some of the early obstacles which can emerge as planners and civic leaders, and parents, seek to convince a broad network of interests about the importance of transforming a heretofore neglected schoolyard. While no one can predict the future, organizers and coalition facilitators should try to anticipate the potential questions and obstacles that may arise as the goals for the schoolyard move from the planning stages through implementation. Even across a range of community settings, common issues typically develop having to do with leadership, liability, the roles of parents and schools, and the relationship with government agencies. These issues can be presented in the form of questions that planners and facilitators could anticipate:

Which individual or city agency is responsible for planning improvements?

Who would spearhead the improvements?

Who would be liable for any injuries that resulted during improvements?

Which private foundations might be willing to help with funding for planning and improvements?

What could the City offer in return for the community partnership?

How will trust be built and encouraged among the participants?

What kinds of people resources are needed?

Who speaks for whom when there are so many important partners?

How will parents become involved and believe that their voices count in the implementation of the initiative?

How can the schools themselves become involved?

What groups should we contact about the project?

Who can help us make the project a success?

Even with the most concise mission statement and clearly stated goals, planners and facilitators must realize that there will be a host of potential problems in the planning and implementation of the plan, but also in encouraging early and sustaining community support. The following are some of the kinds of problems which emerge through the initial planning stages for transforming schoolyards.

The lack of a facilitator or mechanism to help summarize, synthesize, and report developments in a forward-looking way

> The solution may be to appoint someone to take on this role or secure the services of someone who can do this in a thoughtful manner, a skill that can be developed in many walks of life.

Conflicts regarding differences in the decision-making styles of the various partners involved with the project

> The best way to resolve conflicts is to try to keep them from becoming personal, to have a pre-agreed-upon decision-making process, and to try to move projects along by consensus. If a group becomes stuck on a disagreement, a potential solution is to find an outside person who is respected by all members of the planning committee to facilitate a discussion or mediate a solution. For example, a community elder, or someone from outside the community who is respected by all, may have the ability to bring diverse people together to resolve a dispute.

Conflicts in the positions/opinions among representatives of government agencies, the private sector and foundations, and community residents regarding their own sense of the best interests for the schoolyard and the children

> Everyone has an experience to contribute and a point of view to share. It is important that planners and facilitators not discourage discussion, even of issues that might divide the group, so that coalition members can continue to trust the collaborative process. Sometimes people believe that avoiding divisive issues will prevent them from emerging. Nothing could be further from the truth. Divisive issues may not be resolvable, but the point is not to resolve them, but rather to manage them in ways that assure all participants, regardless of whether they win or lose, are still heard and respected. A schoolyard project cannot erase the past, it can only contribute to the future.

Overcoming civic cynicism, especially in the early stages of planning and implementation, and especially among teachers and parents

> The best way to overcome cynicism is to acknowledge it exists and respond to it. One way of responding is by demonstrating the breadth and depth of the coalition that is working to improve the schoolyard or playground. The playspaces deteriorated because of problems of maintenance and funding. The revitalization of the space represents a chance to begin anew.

The definition and role of expertise as an obstacle to participation and collaboration

Although residents may not possess the specific technical knowledge held by planners or government representatives, they still have their own expertise on a range of issues facing their neighborhoods that can be valuable across the stages of the project. These other types of experiences should be used to help improve the final project, but also to inform current and future planning processes and related activities.

From Plan to Implementation

The design of parks and playgrounds can be complicated because it may involve a complex set of governmental rules and regulations. Many cities and towns have highly detailed guidelines for the preparation of bid documents or implementation of capital (long-term) improvements that must be followed whenever public money or public land is involved. Therefore, it's essential to select a design professional who has a lot of experience and can work with community partners. For example, most projects will need the services of a landscape architect who can cost out a project prior to its being bid out and also identify sources for equipment, vegetation, and hard surfaces, such as asphalt, that are safe and appropriate for children. The individual selected should be experienced in designing parks and playgrounds, familiar with local conditions, willing to work with the partnership, committed to its collaborative process, and legally qualified to submit plans and oversee work (if that is to be part of their responsibility).

Some localities and public agencies have architects on staff who will be responsible for developing or reviewing plans. Most operate under detailed guidelines for selecting landscape architect consulting services if they are needed. In most cases, the local agency will be responsible for hiring the architect, but the partnership may be allowed to participate in this process to the maximum feasible limit. Regardless of how they are selected, an experienced landscape architect can play an important role in helping the park partnership translate ideas into plans.

Designing a park or playground as part of a collaborative process can be time consuming and may take as long as a year or more, depending on the complexity of the project and the stability of funds. Along with the landscape architect, the partnership must include people from all segments of the community as well as key outside stakeholders, such as funders; the public agency that will own the park/playground; users of the facilities; and neighbors. All of these individuals must understand that the process will be long and that it will be consensus driven. There are a series of steps that are common to the development of plans.

Step one: **Document existing conditions**.

The landscape architect should prepare what are called "existing conditions documents," a set of plans that show what is currently on the site, including exact measurements of the site's dimensions. These measurements should include detailed locations of utilities, other easements, and trees, as well an assessment of the conditions of the grounds, play equipment, hard surfaces, and other facilities.

Step two: **Identify potential users and develop a program.**

The program is the set of activities and features that will be on the site. People who may end up using the grounds may include teachers and students, neighborhood children, residents, people who work in the community, and members of organizations and groups that might eventually use the site. This step is the time to develop a

program for the space by identifying how the various groups might use the grounds and the design features needed to accommodate them. These features may include the hours for the park/playground and the types of activities that will be allowed, and the facilities that they would need, such as basketball courts, ball fields, walking paths, play equipment for children of different ages, and so on. A project's land area and budget rarely can accommodate all the activities a community might want. Developing these plans therefore, requires compromise, downscaling wish lists, and making trade-offs among proposed activities.

Step three: Develop preliminary drawings.

Based upon the initial program and plan, the landscape architect can develop preliminary drawings that outline the overall layout of the proposed project and the general location of the various activities. This step may identify additional problems with the proposed design and/or spark further discussion about what is practical for the project. Additional compromise and accommodation may be necessary.

These plans will take the preliminary drawing one more step closer to completion. After reaching a consensus on the proposed program, the landscape architect will develop preliminary plans. These drawings will be detailed enough to include the rough dimensions of play areas, grass areas, and other major features; the manufacturer or supplier of play equipment and other purchased items; and enough information for the landscape architect or the public agency's staff to estimate the cost of the proposed project.

This step is often a time that can initially disappoint participants. After the group has worked hard to develop a consensus, the cost estimate may prove to be too high, and there may be insufficient resources to pay for all the agreed-upon improvements. The partnership may have to go back to the program and reduce its scope or secure additional funds. Ultimately, there may be several rounds of preliminary plans and re-programming of spaces before a final feasible program is developed. Participants should be forewarned about the potential for temporary set-backs at this stage, and even better if possible, much earlier.

Step four: Create detailed plans for construction.

The next step is the development of construction documents, detailed plans that specify the exact type and location of each shrub, tree, and planting area; the location and exact type of play equipment; and so on. Typically, these plans consist of a set of blueprints and an accompanying book that includes instructions for how individual items are to be built or planted, product data sheets, and other detailed specs for construction. When building the new park/playground, the contractors will follow these instructions like a cookbook. In most localities, the plans are legal documents that are used to put a project out to bid and determine if a contractor has satisfactorily met the requirements for being paid.

These documents also may have to be reviewed by the local building department to determine that they comply with building codes and other legal requirements. This phase of the project can also be time consuming. It usually requires less input from the partnership, but a presentation describing the documents should be made to the partnership members.

Step five: Take the project out to bid.

Most projects involving public dollars or public land have to secure written, legally binding, dollar estimates from contractors known as a bid. The final documents serve as the basis for taking a project out to bid. Because most projects will subject to strict laws outlining the bidding process that may include legal restrictions on who is eligible to bid on the project posting of bonds accompanying bids, disclosers of financial and other conflicts of interests, references for similar projects, detailed pricing information, etc. Usually the bidding process is supervised by and is the responsibility of the agency (school department, parks and recreation department, etc.) that will be the final owner of the project. however, even projects that are fully private can benefit from hiring an experienced project manager to oversee this process.

Step six: Award the construction contract.

When the bids come in, the partnership may again face costs higher than the budget allows. Depending on the size of the budget over-run and the legal requirements of the project owner, the coalition may need to make revisions to the project, negotiate with the winning bidder, or re-draft the project and submit the revised documents for re-bidding. Again, each locality may have its own rules for the definition of what is an acceptable bid, how bids are processed legally, and how the quality of contractors and bid responses must be assessed. It is important to note that the construction contract is a legally binding document between the owner of the project and the contractor. This may necessitate certain legally mandated steps that are beyond the control or review of the advisory group that has overseen the development of the project.

Step seven: Anticipate the groundbreaking.

After a contractor is selected, there may be a delay in beginning the project because of weather or the need to secure final approvals. In any case, the partnership should be kept aware of the forecast groundbreaking date. Small ceremonies or celebrations are an excellent way of thanking participants, generating publicity for the project, and keeping the community informed of its progress.

Step eight: Provide oversight during construction.

The landscape architect or agency staff should provide oversight during construction, ensuring that the construction documents are being followed, resolving conflicts or problems arising from unforeseen conditions, and monitoring the overall quality of the work, including mitigation of construction impacts on neighbors. The

landscape architect, along with the public agency or private property owner, should also certify the date that construction will be completed. Often, the contractor or supplier furnishes guarantees and warranties for equipment or even the construction itself. These guarantees should be carefully cataloged for the warranty period and eventually transferred to the property owner.

Step Nine: Celebrate!

Hold an opening ceremony. Invite local groups, the neighborhood, the media and any people who have helped you through the process. Acknowledgements and thank yous can go a long way to make a project sustainable.

Sustainability and Evaluation

Ensuring that a project lasts is critical. Given the time and money that go into a schoolyard redevelopment project, it is essential to maximize its useable lifespan. A number of strategies may be useful in this process. First, whenever possible, include early in the planning process the staff who will ultimately be responsible for maintenance of the grounds and facilities. They can add their expertise to the development of the design, for example, pointing out problems that others may not foresee, and they can begin planning for maintenance before the project is completed.

Second, consider devoting resources to enable the staff to receive special training or to purchase special equipment for maintenance. This step may help ensure that the project is properly maintained.

Third, consider raising funds to pay for staff that will be dedicated to maintenance. These staff may be shared with other similar projects and may include public or privately hired personnel. Neighborhoods often value appropriately funded staff who are adequately compensated. Fourth, vegetation and hard surfaces should be selected that are appropriate for the multiple uses predicted for the renovated schoolyard. These design features may include plants native to an area, plants that can withstand droughts or other weather events, and hard surfaces built to minimize wear and tear. It is important to discuss early in the planning process the maintenance that will be required for the grounds and facilities and to formulate a maintenance strategy with clear responsibilities.

Evaluation of a schoolyard renovation initiative is a key part of sustainability. Participants will want to know about the strengths, limitations, impact, and even mistakes made regarding the implementation to revitalize a schoolyard. A framework for approaching evaluations is to consider two related components: a *formative* one, and a *summative* component.

The formative component focuses on identifying the strengths and limitations, or even, 'efficiency' of the design and implementation phases of the initiative. There may be a range of evaluation frameworks and tools to conduct a formative evaluation resonate with a specific project or neighborhood, but one could begin with a set of questions focusing on design and implementation issues. Some examples of such questions might be:

- *What kinds of neighborhood characteristics or information were tapped in approaching the design of the initiative? Was any information about the neighborhood that might affect implementation of activities overlooked?*

- *What kinds of data are being collected about the initiative? What should be collected, and how should it be reported?*

- *Is there a mechanism for participants to provide feedback regarding the ongoing implementation of the initiative? If so, how are decisions about such feedback be made and who is responsible for this kind of decision-making?*

- *How would staff turnover affect the initiative at different stages?*

- *How are new civic relationships being envisioned, and then pursued?*

- *What mechanisms exist for exploring how the initiative can survive after funding ends? How do we know that these mechanisms will be effective? What kinds of financial support are built into the design of the plan?*

- *What kinds of obstacles prevent or inhibit the growth of the coalition? What are the plans or activities aimed at overcoming these obstacles?*

- *How are the school and schoolyard being integrated with other community-based sectors? What kinds of activities are utilized to ensure the success of this goal?*

- *How will we know success when we see it? How should success be measured?*

These are only suggestions for the kinds of questions that could be raised about the design, planning, and implementation of an initiative. Another category of questions can be aimed at assessing the impact of the initiative. While a particular project may be quite 'efficient', is it also, 'effective', in other words?

Examples of questions that might help in understanding if an initiative is making a difference in the school, the community, or on civic partnerships could include the following:

- *What are the pedagogical impacts of the initiative? Does it make a difference or change what teachers teach in, and outside the classroom? Are teaching styles affected, in any way, by the initiative? Does it enhance the impact of teaching?*

- *Has the schoolyard become more integrated into the organization and pedagogy of the sponsoring school and its leadership, staff, and teachers? How so, and what changes has this precipitated?*

- *How has the initiative changed parental participation? How has it changed teacher-staff-parent relationships, and does the latter have any impact on the behavior or learning outcomes of children?*

- *How have community attitudes about the school, or anything, changed a result of the schoolyard initiative?*

Again, these questions are only suggestive of issues that can be raised regarding the impact of a schoolyard initiative. Both the formative and summative questions that are raised have to resonate with the actual initiative at various locations.

Conclusion

We hope that this short manual is helpful to people interested in using schoolyards as an educational and community resource. Schoolyards, as noted earlier, can represent a potential space for teaching and learning, recreation and fun, building social capital and civic capacity, and making the neighborhood look good! While overlooked at times, this is an invaluable resource for everyone.

This manual ends with a short and select bibliography for readers wishing to obtain additional information about the renovation and renaissance of our urban school yards. Interested readers should also see the impressive resources available through the BSI's website, www.schoolyards.com

- C. Chung, "Connecting Public Schools to Community Development" *Communities & Banking* (Winter 2005)

- R. Halpern, "After-School Programs for Low-Income Children: Promise and Challenges" *The Future of Children: When School is Out*, Vol.9, No.2 (Fall 1999)

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- The Lewin Group, *Evaluating Community Collaborations: A Research Synthesis* Prepared for Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Department of Health and Human Services (April 3,2000)

- The Report of the Massachusetts Special Commission on After School and Out of School of Time, *Our Common Wealth: Building a Future for Our Children and Youth* (November 2007)

- Active Living Research. www.activelivingresearch.org

- Latino Childhood Obesity. www.salud-america.org

- California walk to school www.cawalktoschool.com

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - Childhood Obesity www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/obesity/