

CASE STUDY

Green Community Schoolyards in New York City

Green City

Climate Ready City



Climate Issue:

- New York City (NYC) faces increased risks of extreme weather events due to climate change, including flooding and heat waves.
- Green spaces mitigate these risks, especially if developed with green infrastructure, such as rain gardens.
- These amenities are unequally distributed across NYC due to systemic racism and historic disinvestment.
- Schoolyards present an untapped opportunity for equalizing green space throughout NYC. However, before the early 2000s, they were mostly covered by asphalt.
- This meant they were part of the problem. Asphalt replaces greenery, traps heat and prevents water drainage during flooding events.

Political, Social, and Institutional Triggers

- Historically, unequal investment in parks across New York City has led to neglect and resident distrust.
- Park improvements can increase property values, pricing out long-time residents and benefiting wealthier newcomers.
- Unfulfilled promises from officials and developers deepened distrust when improvements were not delivered or did not meet community needs.
- Assessing this landscape, the nonprofit Trust for Public Land (TPL) launched the Green Community Schoolyards program to expand accessible green spaces in NYC.

Since 2004, the Green Community Schoolyards program has transformed 230 asphalt schoolyards across all five boroughs into green, flood-mitigating public spaces.

Over 100 acres of impervious asphalt have been replaced with greenery. 4.3 million New Yorkers now live within a 10-minute walk of green space.

These efforts are integrated into New York's heat remediation and extreme flooding response plans, inspiring projects nationwide.

Including the Excluded

Green Community Schoolyards leverages the concept of community-owned space to maximize benefits to residents and ensure long-term sustainability.

- Project sites are selected using a data-driven approach to maximize social benefits and climate resilience.
- Students are the lead designers for schoolyard greening efforts, with help from community members. This participatory design process empowers neighborhoods to effectively advocate for their future needs.
- TPL supports school maintenance staff and local community groups to care for each new schoolyard. It works with them to create a plan for managing the space.
- Schoolyards are open to the public outside of school hours, serving as community centers that strengthen local bonds.
- Climate education is integrated into school curriculums to demonstrate the impact of green schoolyards.

Enabling Factors

TPL has strategically aligned Green Community Schoolyards with citywide efforts for climate resilience over the last 20 years. The program's adaptability to different governance structures has enabled continued growth and longevity.

- TPL has partnered with the NYC Mayor's Office and Department of Education to secure a variety of public funding sources for schoolyard greening. The program is part of PlaNYC 2030, targeting green space accessibility.
- TPL works with the School Construction Authority, so green schoolyards can bypass bureaucracy for faster, cheaper completion.
- In 2012, following Hurricane Sandy, TPL partnered with the NYC Department of Environmental Protection to build green infrastructure into all schoolyard projects. This has unlocked sources for funding and logistical support.
- Economic analyses show that green spaces like schoolyards can help pay for themselves through property tax revenue, healthcare savings, and recreational value.
- However, the program ultimately relies on community partnerships for maintenance and site activation.

Green Community Schoolyards was a 2023-2024 finalist for the WRI Ross Center Prize for Cities, a global award celebrating and spotlighting transformative urban change. Information was self-reported by finalists. Learn more at tpl.org/our-mission/schoolyards, prizeforcities.org and wri.org/cities.

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Ongoing Barriers to Success

Funding gaps

- Traditional funding sources are often insufficient to fund park management, especially in low-income areas. TPL's innovative partnership structures help bridge this gap.
- The COVID-19 pandemic led to budget reductions for NYC Parks, impacting maintenance of green schoolyards.

Historical distrust and fear of displacement

- Underserved communities can be skeptical of new initiatives, fearing unfulfilled promises or the potential for gentrification and displacement.
- To combat this distrust, TPL has centered community groups in all its schoolyard greening projects. It does not pursue projects that residents do not want.

Cultural and behavioral norms

- The Green Community Schoolyards program relies on a concept of community-owned space that is not universal.
- Many neighborhoods face low civic engagement, which can make it challenging to gather input and establish plans for long-term maintenance.
- The perception that parks are not for everyone can lead to community members' underuse of new or improved parks.
- TPL has continued to build site-specific partnerships to ensure green schoolyards are inclusive community spaces.

Sustaining & Scaling Up:

TPL has aligned its efforts with NYC's wider plans for equity and climate resilience, enabling continuous growth. The program scope has been sustained and scaled up by:

Gaining public buy-in

- Maintaining transparent communication with residents so they understand the project's value.
- Inviting community members to visit existing green schoolyards to demonstrate their positive impacts.
- Developing site-specific partnerships with community groups to ensure projects match neighborhood needs.
- Establishing long-term community involvement in maintenance to encourage a sense of ownership.

Withstanding administrative turnover

- Creating formal agreements between TPL and government agencies to ensure green schoolyards are open to all.
- Integrating schoolyard greening into city or community policy frameworks such as PlaNYC 2030.

Scaling up, out, and across

- Building new norms around community-owned space.
- Expanding in its full form to 14 additional cities, and sharing best practices with 15 cities across the United States.
- Partnering with organizations such as Green Schoolyards America for nationwide change.

IN A NUTSHELL

- Many New York City neighborhoods face limited access to green space, exacerbating the vulnerability to climate risks.
- Schoolyards represent an untapped resource for high-quality community spaces and lifesaving green infrastructure.
- The Green Community Schoolyards program has aligned its efforts with citywide plans for equity and climate resilience to ensure long-term project growth.
- Site-specific partnerships instill a sense of community ownership. This builds momentum for long-term maintenance and maximum neighborhood benefits.

WHAT CAN YOUR CITY DO?

INTEGRATE schoolyard greening into citywide plans to combat climate risks, such as flooding and extreme heat.

APPLY a data-driven approach to select sites for schoolyard greening that maximize neighborhood benefits.

ENCOURAGE residents, including schoolchildren, to participate in site design and activation.

ESTABLISH long-term engagement through strategic partnerships with site-specific community groups.

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