All Children Need Quality Schoolyards

Quality schoolyards are important places for elementary schools because outdoor activities are critical for growth, health, education and enjoyment. All children should experience pleasant and well-equipped outdoor environments on a daily basis.

Small Athletic Field
Bancroft Elementary School

Vegetable Garden
Peabody Elementary School

Playground Seating
Hearst Elementary School
A Good Education Includes Outdoor Activities

Quality schoolyards provide opportunities for the physical challenges, exercise, sensory play, fantasy play, organized sports and unsupervised free play that allow for healthy, well-rounded development.

Schoolyards should be safe places where children practice social skills and develop an appreciation for the feelings of others and the complexities of the natural environment.
Some Children Have Uninviting Schoolyards

Many schools do not have inviting playgrounds. Poor quality schoolyards, like these examples, may have new play structures but still not be welcoming to children or adults. There is little to no shade, water, seating, social areas or any natural environment for children or adults to learn from or enjoy.

Poor Quality Hardscape with New Equipment
Harriet Tubman Elementary School

Poor Quality Hardscape with Old Equipment
Martin Luther King Elementary School
Great Schoolyards Support:

- **Healthy Child Development**
  - Basketball Court
    - Key Elementary School

- **Quality Education**
  - Children’s Garden Classroom
    - DC Bilingual Elementary School

- **Community Vitality**
  - Early Childhood Area
    - Bancroft Elementary School (former play area)

- **Sustainable Environment**
  - Small Athletic Field
    - Eaton Elementary School
Healthy Child Development

Interesting and inviting outdoor areas support healthy growth by providing a variety of ways to encourage children to engage in:

- Sensory Play
- Social Play
- Fantasy Play
- Active Exercise
- Exploring the Natural Environment

Sandbox Area
Guy Mason Recreation Center
Sensory Play

Children enjoy actively using touch, sight, smell, taste and hearing as they play. A variety of different play equipment, surface textures, trees, shrubs and plants invites children to explore their environment and stretch their abilities.

An essential part of early childhood development is awareness of weather and the rhythm of the seasons. Time outside every day makes this possible.
Informal social play is critical to healthy development. Creative games with child-negotiated rules and cooperative projects are as important as organized team sports.

**Social Play**

**Free Play Time**
Bancroft Elementary School (former play area)

**Sandbox Area**
Guy Mason Recreation Center

**Boulder Climbing Circle**
Guy Mason Recreation Center
Fantasy Play

Places for children to engage in fantasy play enhance skills such as creativity, communication and problem solving. Schoolyards can invite imaginary play with features that stimulate the imagination but are not overly designed, leaving lots of space and materials for improvisation.
Active Exercise

With childhood obesity reaching epidemic levels, active playtime becomes crucial. Teachers are more likely to take children outside when school yards are inviting.

Besides hard surfaces for jump rope and basketball, it is important to have grassy areas for organized field sports or just for informal play.
Exploring the Natural Environment

All children need a chance to explore the great variety of grasses, shrubs, plants, insects, trees and natural materials that can be found on thoughtfully planted schoolyards.

Wildflower Garden and Vegetable Beds (former)
Bancroft Elementary School
Quality Education

Outdoor activities expand learning experiences and encourage unstructured play and social interaction. The out-of-doors should be used regularly for:

- Outdoor classroom projects
- Hands-on environmental science
- School gardens and nutritional studies
- Physical education

Outdoor activities also contribute to learning by improving the focus and attention of children upon their return to the indoors.

Sand and Water Table
Bancroft Elementary School
Outdoor Learning

Outdoor classrooms allow for a range of teacher-led projects that require more space, are too messy or too loud for inside. These can include science experiments, art projects or hands-on environmental education.

Outdoor classrooms need flexible space and moveable furniture that can accommodate a wide variety of uses. Tables with good work-surfaces and space for materials are important; a covered area for shade and access to a water source is optimal.

Students also enjoy having a quiet place for independent reading, writing or drawing.

Outdoor performance space can accommodate scripted classroom projects or impromptu student dramatics.
Effective environmental science instruction often includes complex outdoor experiences. Just a few examples are studying plant development or insect observation or learning about erosion.
Physical Education

Well-equipped athletic space is an essential schoolyard component. Every day, children need at least an hour of active play with moderate to vigorous activity.

Participating in organized sports can be rewarding for children; it can build the foundation for a lifetime of enjoyment. Team play embodies a wealth of values that transfer to the adult workplace.
School Vegetable Gardens

School gardens are an enjoyable way for children and families to appreciate how food grows. When children have the opportunity to plant and harvest fruits and vegetables they get firsthand lessons about nutrition and come to understand the importance of agriculture.

Squash and Marigolds in a Planter
HD Cooke Elementary School

Raised Garden Beds with Wide Walkways
Mann Elementary School
Playgrounds Designed for All Abilities

A broad range of schoolyard activities is critical for all children including children with physical disabilities.

Outdoor play areas and classrooms designed with wide pathways, specialized swings and low transfer platforms can accommodate all children.
Community Vitality

High quality schoolyards contribute to community vitality. They provide readily available green space, sun, shade and enjoyable natural habitats for residents within walking distance. Schools are important as community parks, community gardens and neighborhood gathering places.

Sunday Afternoon Baseball Practice
Lafayette Elementary School
Elementary schoolyards are a feature of most neighborhoods. They often serve as centers for civic life and can be valuable community assets. They invite use after school and weekends, providing public outdoor space for children, teenagers and neighbors of all ages.
Safe School Yards

Pleasant, well maintained schoolyards attract responsible use that helps ensure public safety.

Schools with outdoor play areas that are visible from the street and can be informally supervised by the neighborhood and are generally safe places.
Green Open Space

Schoolyards are a critical core component of city infrastructure. They provide public open space within densely developed urban areas, which improves air quality, provides recreational opportunities, and increases livability.

Row Houses, Streets and Parking Lots Surround School Playing Field
Garrison Elementary School
Policies to Support Quality Schoolyards

Citizens can work with municipal and school district officials to promote policies that encourage schoolyard improvements, school and community use, and ongoing maintenance. Check to see if policies such as these are in place:

- Education policies allowing time in daily school schedules for outdoor activities
- Master site plans and capital funds for major improvements to school yards
- School district operating budgets that include sufficient funding for grounds maintenance and landscaping
- Policies and guidelines that keep schoolyards open to the public
- Policies that permit and encourage community gardens on schoolyards
- Environmental policies promoting tree canopies and wildlife habitats
- Storm water policies to reduce run-off and capture rain water in schoolyards
- Child health protections favoring shade coverings and drinking fountains
- Transportation and school location policies that increase school walk-ability and reduce bussing, parking and drop-off
Communities Can Improve Schoolyards

High quality schoolyards come together when parents, teachers and community members set out to improve schools and neighborhoods. School-based groups can devise processes to create and maintain high quality schoolyards.

- Assess
- Envision
- Plan
- Develop
- Implement
- Maintain

Planting a Shade Tree for the New Playground
J.O. Wilson Elementary School
## Assess Your Schoolyard

### Rate Your Elementary Schoolyard: Features to Look For

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>On Site?</th>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Total Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are there multiple types of play areas?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a variety of play and athletic equipment?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is access available for children of all abilities?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there plenty of shaded areas for children and adults?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there comfortable seating for children and adults?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there open space for organized sports?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a hardscape ball court?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a grassy or artificial turf playing field?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there working drinking fountains on the schoolyard?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there an outdoor classroom?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are working water connections available?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there school garden beds?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there environmental habitat areas?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there varieties of interesting and educational shrubs and plants?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can neighbors use the schoolyard after school and on weekends?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the schoolyard designed for passive observation?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do people feel safe in the schoolyard?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If there are fences, are they appropriate in size, design and location?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there appropriate lighting?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the schoolyard regularly maintained and upgraded?</td>
<td>Yes = 2</td>
<td>Good = 3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL POINTS For A Quality Schoolyard**

40 60 100
Envision a Quality Schoolyard

• Meet with students, teachers, neighbors in a committee; outline a public process to discuss how your school and community will use the school grounds for education, recreation and environmental sustainability.
• Visit other schoolyards and gardens to get ideas.
• Get help and ideas from landscape architects, engineers and designers (pro bono!).
• Write and illustrate a proposed vision to take to your school community and district for review.
Develop and Plan A Quality Schoolyard

- Look for public or private planning grants.
- Develop a site Master Plan, with discussions including community members, local school staff, parents and students, as well as school facilities managers and professional architects and engineers.
- Develop a schedule for implementation, including phased implementation over several years if all funding is not currently available.
- Identify amount and sources of funding need to implement site master plan.
Implementation

• Qualify and procure the design, engineering, and construction services that will be needed to implement the site master plan.
• Monitor all stages of design, engineering and construction.

Construction is exciting, time-consuming and bothersome. But it can be an great learning experience for students.
Continuing Maintenance Is Critical

• Regular maintenance planning and budgeting keeps the public vision and public investment intact.
• Some organized maintenance can be community based.
Modest Projects Make a Difference

Work with school administrators, teachers, community, private donors and non-profits to:

- Organize a seasonal work day to weed and mulch shrubs and perennials
- Match up certified volunteers to teach playground games: hopscotch, double-dutch, etc.
- Plant shade trees or native flowering plants (check for a master landscaping plan).
- Raise funds for heavy-duty playground awnings.

Students Help Build New Garden Boxes
Stoddert Elementary School
Volunteers Can Really Help

Check with principals and teachers to coordinate activities in advance.

Suggestions:

• Collect playground toys for each class: inflatable balls, jump ropes, hula-hoops, sidewalk chalk, sandbox toys.
• Pick up playground trash on a daily basis.
• Help keep school gardens watered in the summer.
• Tackle a small landscaping or maintenance project.
• Make sure there are working water spigots (follow up on existing work orders).

Volunteers Dig Up and Move a Dead Tree Stump
Bancroft Elementary

Realizing the Vision

21st Century School Fund
About This Handbook

With funding from The Prince Charitable Trusts, the 21st Century School Fund surveyed District of Columbia public elementary school outdoor space in the spring and summer of 2010. This review identified key elements of healthy, safe and educationally rich schoolyards. Please contact info@21csf.org for more information.

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Garden, Turf Field & Ball Court
Mann Elementary School

Colorful Awnings
Stead Recreation Center

Planting a Butterfly Garden
H.D. Cooke Elementary School