2 Improve Public Schoolyards

Butterfly Garden at
Cardozo Senior High School

Big Idea in Action

In the past, great value was placed on the importance of open space and recreation in early childhood development. Further, federal and local plans sought to co-locate public facilities and use them for broader community purposes. Schools played a critical component in this strategy, offering joint learning and recreational facilities and serving as neighborhood centers. Schoolyards continue to play an important role in providing open space and recreation for the city's children, and as a focal point of community life.

In the future, students at District of Columbia schools will gaze out their classroom windows in eager anticipation of their outdoor class time. For recess, students will be able to play kickball on green athletic fields, explore butterfly gardens, or play quietly with friends in a shaded spot. Other students will spend some classroom time outdoors to learn from their science teacher about the role trees play in mitigating climate change and how the native wildlife habitat helps to preserve biodiversity in their neighborhood.

Public schoolyards serve as places of recreation and physical activity, and also provide centers of learning about the environment, food systems, and healthy living. This is particularly important in Washington, which has one of the highest childhood obesity rates in the country. A combination of physical activity and learning about healthy living, for example, through development of a schoolyard vegetable garden provides a powerful antidote to childhood obesity and a host of other physical and emotional health issues that commonly affect students.

With innovative stormwater management features, such as rain gardens, integrated into schoolyards, children can learn how greening their schoolyard is beneficial for the environment. With the District's public schoolyards using sustainable design strategies, all of Washington benefits through improved water quality.

Library of Congress

Central High students at a track meet in 1925

Brief History of Schoolyard Expansion and Neighborhood Recreational Centers

Library of Congress

Schoolyards, such as at Ross Elementary School, provided venues for competitive sports.

At the turn of the 20th century, new ideas were developed about the importance of open space and recreation in early childhood development. These ideas were rooted in the Progressive belief that an orderly environment played an important role in creating healthy families and communities. In 1901, Washington's first neighborhood playground opened in Southwest at the Neighborhood House, a privately operated community center. In the following years, federal and local government agencies worked together to systematically provide areas for active recreation across the city. With the support of a powerful parks movement and an emerging recreational leadership, schools became a critical component in providing publicly accessible recreation areas throughout Washington.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, a number of governmental bodies, including the District's Department of Playgrounds, the municipal Board of Education, and the federal National Capital Park and Planning Commission (NCPPC), oversaw implementation of new playgrounds and fields in schoolyards. These new schoolyards met goals for student and community recreational needs. The District established a four acre minimum size for new school sites, one of the first cities in the United States to do so. In 1927, NCPPC promoted the concept of neighborhood centers, planning for new schools, athletic fields, and recreational areas to be located in close proximity to other municipal buildings, such as fire and police stations, and libraries. These joint learning and recreational facilities were to be the focal point of community life, functioning as neighborhood open spaces where students and families could come together.

As of 2006, public schools contained many of the city's overall recreational resources, providing 49 percent of playgrounds, 56 percent of football fields, and 39 percent of basketball courts.

Today, several entities manage the construction and maintenance of schoolyards, including the District of Columbia Office of Public Education Facilities Modernization, DCPS and DC Parks and Recreation. The District of Columbia's Department of Transportation (DDOT) maintains the perimeters of some schoolyards, and DPR maintains 16 athletic fields located on schoolyards. In some instances, the federal government retains the underlying ownership of schoolyards. The generally balanced distribution of schoolyards throughout Washington provides important access to recreation and open space that meets some, but not all, of resident needs.

Some schools' athletic fields are waterlogged and unusable even in good weather.

The broken sight lines on the grounds of some elementary schools, like the one here blocked by an outdoor stage, present safety issues even during daylight hours.

Challenges

A number of District public schoolyards suffer from overuse, contain aging infrastructure, and are in need of modernization. Although the District is making unprecedented investments in school modernization and new facilities, some elementary schools are still equipped with out-of date playground equipment and non-regulation size athletic fields. In 2009, the District unveiled an extensive public school facilities modernization program, with a focus on the buildings—not the schoolyards. Private and charter schools fall outside of the scope of the school modernization process.

School administrators may have safety concerns about opening schoolyards to the public because they are unable to secure the site during school hours. These security concerns may be amplified by poor site design and physical conditions, such as high walls or hidden corners, that make it difficult to monitor students in the yard during recess and gym. School administrators may also have to address issues of vandalism, hazardous trash, and illegitimate activities caused by unregulated access to the schoolyard.

Developing a District-wide schoolyard modernization program is difficult because public schoolyards are diverse in size, schools have different programming needs, and there may be potential location and external pressures. These challenges can make it difficult to develop broad standards and policies that can be applied to all school sites.

Another challenge is that schoolyard improvement, programming, field permitting, and maintenance responsibilities are shared by several District agencies. While the public may only see a unified open space, the number of agencies involved makes coordinating ongoing maintenance, improvements, and overall access challenging.

For many neighborhoods, schoolyards are the only easily accessible open space. This puts added pressure on the schoolyards to accommodate the recreation and open-space needs of students and nearby residents.

Opened in 2009, the Walker Jones Education Campus in Northwest includes a public library, recreation center, and fields, continuing the tradition of providing multiple education and recreation facilities at one site.

J.O. Wilson Elementary School received a new schoolyard in 2009. Amenities include new playground equipment, a plaza, and an outdoor garden.

21st Century School Fund

21st Century School Fund

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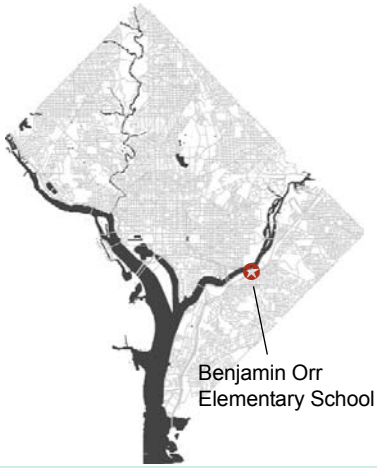
Opportunities

Schoolyards can provide critical recreational and environmental education opportunities for students. More classroom plans are incorporating the outdoors, and children need accessible outdoor spaces to learn about a wide variety of subjects including biology, history, personal health, and the environment. Adequate exercise, outdoor play, and team sports have proven to be critical in helping children become healthy adults. Physical activity can also help reduce childhood obesity, which 2009 estimates had affecting 35 percent of the District's children.

Schoolyards can also provide important community recreation and open space locations during non-school hours. Making use of existing open space is particularly important in neighborhoods where park resources are otherwise scarce. Schoolyard improvements thus provide concurrent benefits to nearby residents. Well-landscaped and designed school sites can help to beautify neighborhoods and increase environmental stewardship among students, teachers, parents and the surrounding community.

While schoolyards are not currently the focus of the school modernization program, there is an opportunity to develop a comprehensive schoolyard program and integrate it within the existing modernization process with the help of other District agencies. The District of Columbia Department of the Environment developed programs to green school sites, and the agency works closely with DC Schoolyard Greening, a program of the DC Environmental Education Consortium, to lay the foundation for improving schoolyards. DPR is also working to co-locate more of its facilities with existing schools to save money and provide more centralized and integrated community services, including open space. Through shared agency goals, these programs can further increase the benefits conferred by schoolyard modernization.

Benjamin Orr Elementary School



A positive aspect of Orr's schoolyard is a painted mural and learning landscape.

Proposed Access and Safety

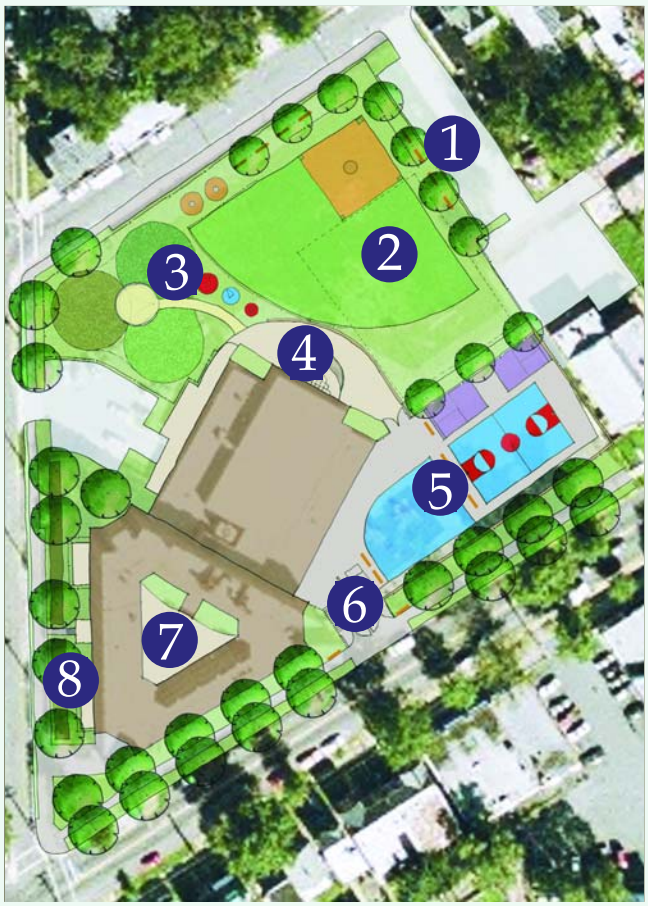
Identifying appropriate public access to Orr's schoolyard can help improve student safety.

Built in 1974, Benjamin Orr Elementary School was selected as a model project because it has not been through a major modernization, its 1.4 acres are considered average in size compared to other schools, and it is in an area of Southeast Washington identified as underserved by parks, open space, and recreational facilities. Orr's schoolyard provides recreation opportunities for students and the community, and includes a play area, baseball backstop, basketball courts, and a stage/seating area. Orr has 276 students, and approximately 75 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch. A branch location of the Boys and Girls Club is also located at Orr.

Although all schoolyards are different, Orr's schoolyard has representative opportunities and challenges that can inform schoolyard policies District-wide. The project identified the following goals:

- Meet physical education and health needs by improving existing active recreation amenities, including the play areas, fields, and basketball courts.
- Meet environmental and educational goals through "greening" the schoolyard with gardens or other stormwater measures.
- Address visibility issues.
- Create a new outdoor learning opportunity by expanding the stage area.
- Improve security, school appearance and delineating schoolyard space with landscaping improvements.

Proposed Recreational, Environmental, and Educational Features



This graphic identifies a potential approach to providing recreational, environmental, and educational features within Orr's schoolyard.

1. PARKING
The existing parking lot is reduced in size and 14 new parking spaces are provided along the playground edge. Shared parking with an adjacent church is encouraged for additional capacity.

2. ACTIVE RECREATION
Relocation of an existing slope and wall allows for an improved baseball field with a safety surface infield, an expanded practice/multipurpose field, and room for tetherball.

3. OUTDOOR LEARNING
A wetlands butterfly garden and vegetable garden area could be integrated with school programs and maintenance capabilities. Additional interactive elements could include weather stations, hands-on sculptures, and climbing features. Outdoor learning areas could utilize "boardwalk" access and offer outdoor classroom opportunities.

4. MUSIC STAGE
The existing stage is redesigned to remove barriers and hidden corners, allowing for outdoor music classes complete with fixed musical instruments. An expanded stage platform retains emergency egress.

5. SECURED PLAY AREA
Fenced and gated areas protect ball courts (paddle ball, four-square, etc.), resized age appropriate basketball courts, and an expanded playground with a poured-in-place safety surface.

6. NEW ENTRY
The entryway to the secured play area is redesigned with a wider stairway, a handicapped ramp with stroller access, and seating areas.

7. INTERIOR COURTYARD
The courtyard maintains active play for 2-5 year olds and includes a learning garden on the south-facing wall.

8. WEST SIDE
Removal of the existing wall maze allows for new plantings and a bioswale.

Lessons Learned

Goals identified for schoolyards can be in conflict with each other; approaches should balance all goals. Several competing goals at Orr's schoolyard need to be reconciled. For example, providing community access to the site perpetuates a security challenge for school administrators. Guidelines should balance the need to regulate access to the site and create areas closed to the community after school hours. The proposed access and safety graphic (see prior page) demonstrates how schoolyard access and security issues might be balanced.

Introducing environmental elements such as rain gardens can conflict with recreational activities that require hard surfaces. Guidelines should include specific measures or approaches to analyze how to balance recreation needs with managing stormwater on-site. Fortunately, stormwater measures can be paired with outdoor learning and environmental stewardship goals to meet this balance.

Improvements to parks and open space near schoolyards may help meet demand. Improving parks near schoolyards to provide recreation and other amenities, particularly in neighborhoods where parks resources are scarce, may reduce pressure on schoolyard sites from overuse. Improvements would also meet community recreation and open-space needs. An evaluation of neighborhood park improvement opportunities should be included in any schoolyard improvement strategy. This collaborative approach between schools and parks can help ensure that students have fun, functional, and accessible recreation space during and after school hours, and simultaneously help to ensure that other park users have places for recreation and team sports that do not compete with school needs.

Improve Public Schoolyards

A District-wide priority list for schoolyard improvements could identify which schools will be outfitted with synthetic turf fields, such as Key Elementary School.

Incorporate a Schoolyard Improvement Strategy into School Modernization Programs *(SCH-1)*

A comprehensive strategy to assess and improve the District's schoolyards should be developed. Schoolyards are also important recreational spaces for the neighborhood; therefore, improvements should be planned to maximize their benefits.

- Set goals for the assessment and improvement of the District's schoolyards.
- Develop a District-wide priority list for schoolyard improvements and enhancements.

Preserve Recreation and Open Space for Community Use *(SCH-2)*

Schoolyards provide important recreation space for Washington's residents. Without schoolyards, many neighborhoods would lack access to playgrounds, athletic fields, and green open space.

- Ensure that schoolyards are safe and secure for students.
- Support community use of schoolyards for recreation space, wherever and whenever possible.
- School sites located on federally owned parcels should remain for recreational or school purposes only, unless alternative uses are mutually agreed upon.
- Schoolyards located on District land should remain available for the public, to the greatest extent possible, to ensure that residents' access to parks and open space is not diminished.

Develop District-Wide Guidelines for Schoolyards *(SCH-3)*

Guidelines can assist schoolyard planning. They should be broad and address recreation, stormwater management, landscaping, and environmental education.

- Create design guidelines that encourage the basic schoolyard components.
- Develop guidelines regarding where stormwater measures should be located based on existing infrastructure and site conditions.
- Develop opportunities for enhanced components, such as gardens, and then identify partnership and funding opportunities from non-profits or other groups.

Develop a Collaborative Schoolyard Improvement Program *(SCH-4)*

Several entities play a role in managing schoolyards. Clarifying their responsibilities will improve outcomes. Further, the District would benefit from developing long-term partnerships with community organizations to help meet maintenance challenges.

- Establish basic schoolyard maintenance standards and clarify agency roles and responsibilities for these standards.
- Reassess schoolyard funding mechanisms to determine if it is possible and preferable to have dedicated funding.
- Develop private-public partnerships to maintain schoolyard components that require a higher level of care, such as rain and butterfly gardens, and to provide additional programming.

PLANNING CONCEPTS


Increase Access to Great Local Parks


Connect with Rivers


Protect, Connect, and Restore Natural Resources


Expand Park System Capacity


Link the City with Green Corridors

Watts Branch Park

OBJECTIVES

The ecological resources of the park system are protected, restored, and recognized to be equally important as the recreational and cultural amenities in the neighborhoods and the city as a whole.