

# BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS: BOSTON SCHOOLYARD INITIATIVE

## A BIG-CITY MAYOR CHAMPIONS PLAY

### BOSTON INITIATIVE SUCCEEDS BY AVOIDING COSTLY ERRORS

This public-private collaboration, initially inspired by the green movement, has constructed new schoolyards across the city. With the leadership of Mayor Tom Menino, the Boston Schoolyard Initiative has transformed the outdoor physical space of more than 70 Boston schoolyards into colorful and engaging outdoor classrooms and places to play. The project enjoys ongoing public support and is a sustainable model that relies on public-private funding and a comprehensive maintenance program to provide accessible and high-quality play spaces.

### CONTEXT: LAYING A FOUNDATION FOR COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Many Boston schoolyards were paved over in the 1950s when city leaders discovered that asphalt cost less to maintain. As a result, many of the city's schools—which serve roughly 56,000 students, 72% of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch—had no available green space. Many of the playgrounds that were built after the 1950s were set on asphalt surfaces.

In the 1980s and 1990s, nonprofit entities and individuals expressed interest in investing expertise and resources in the development of green space in Boston. Boston schoolyards became a beneficiary of this green space movement.



*A typical asphalt surface outside a public school (before renovation).*

The nonprofit Boston GreenSpace Alliance was founded in 1985 to promote the protection, creation, and use of Boston's parks and open spaces. In the early 1990s, the Alliance offered grants of \$3,000 to organizations and other entities to implement greening projects. Kirk Meyer, the Alliance's former education director, reached out to schools. According to Meyer, these grants "primed the Boston public school system for the larger schoolyard renovations that Boston Schoolyard Initiative would eventually undertake."

Concurrently, The Boston Globe Foundation was looking for ways to improve the city's overall environment by increasing the percentage of grants they awarded to small community groups and to scientific and environmental programs. As part of this mission, their executive director, Suzanne Maas, established the Urban Land Use Task Force to identify creative ways of making the city a better place to live. The task force was made up of private and public health, housing, and community organizing groups, along with school administrators, community members, environmental advocates, health professionals, and other funders. During meetings held by the task force to discuss common concerns, schoolyards surfaced as one of the groups' five top priorities. Members noted that schoolyards were the city's largest untapped resource for communal green and play space.

PLAY MATTERS  
A STUDY OF BEST PRACTICES  
TO INFORM LOCAL POLICY  
AND PROCESS IN SUPPORT  
OF CHILDREN'S PLAY





*Playground and green spaces connect the school with the community (after renovation).*

**Population of Boston:**  
589,141

**Population under 18:**  
116,649

In the local philanthropy community there was also interest in funding schoolyard improvement initiatives. The Boston-based Philanthropic Initiative had a donor who had been making substantial contributions to schoolyard renovations. Progress was slow, however. Without better systematic attention to schoolyard improvements, the Philanthropic Initiative's executive director expressed concern that donors might withdraw support.

The Boston GreenSpace Alliance and the Urban Land Use Task Force formulated a proposal: a collaboration of public and private groups could revitalize the city's neighborhoods by improving its school playgrounds. Recognizing the need for a key political ally, they reached out to Mayor Menino. The groups secured a meeting with Menino shortly after he took office in 1994.

### **Engaging a Political Ally**

The Boston GreenSpace Alliance, the Urban Land Use Task Force, and private funders presented Menino with their findings: multiple environmental, health, and community organizations were interested in improving open space and play space. They cited the interest that schools were showing in the GreenSpace Alliance's small grant program and spotlighted groups around the city already working to improve school grounds. In order to integrate and align these efforts and improve on the efficiency of the schoolyard renovations, they argued that public leadership was necessary.

The group explained that their proposed collaboration already had private foundation and individual funding sources, constituent support, and organizational backing. They were seeking political rather than financial support from the mayor. The groups needed his help in coordinating city departments involved in renovation and helping to rally support

# BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS: BOSTON SCHOOLYARD INITIATIVE

for their initiative. In response, Menino created the Boston Schoolyard Initiative Task Force to advise the city on the best way to fund schoolyard projects and hasten their completion.

## Engaging Key Stakeholders

Mayor Menino appointed top-ranking city officials to his task force, along with staff from all relevant city departments: City Services, Neighborhood Development, Boston Public Schools, Maintenance, and Transportation. According to Maas, who was asked to be one of the task force co-chairs, engaging these stakeholders streamlined the process and facilitated inter-department communication.

The mayor's task force spent a few months doing site visits to assess schools and neighborhoods and meet with community residents, environmental groups, educators, and city officials. The task force engaged multiple stakeholders in the fields of health, education, and the environment to determine how best to proceed.

## A Comprehensive Solution

In 1995 the Boston Schoolyard Initiative Task Force presented its findings and recommendations on how to turn the city's schoolyards into creative, engaging spaces that incorporate outdoor educational components. The task force proposed that the city establish the Boston Schoolyard Initiative (BSI), which would work directly with schools to design and complete projects. It would be supported by a private entity, the Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative (BSFC).

BSI and BSFC were launched in 1995 as part of a five-year initiative. The mayor committed \$10 million in city funds over five years to BSI. According to Meyer, the mayor's commitment was critical. Public funding was a catalyst for further private sector investment.

## THE INITIATIVE: A STREAMLINED PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

The mayoral task force made specific recommendations: to create a separate entity to streamline projects and resources, engage beneficiaries to develop comprehensive outdoor spaces, and create a sustainable maintenance strategy. The schoolyards were intended to be accessible and open to the community so neighborhood children could benefit as well.

To streamline the process of designing, funding, and constructing the schoolyards, the BSFC was set up as the private fundraising arm and the BSI was established as a public-private partnership between the BSFC and the city, with planning and community organizing responsibility.

The Funders Collaborative was supported by the philanthropic community. Allowing the BSFC to serve as the primary fundraising entity raising funds simplified the funding process, according to Julie Stone, BSFC's program director. Schools who apply for funding through the BSFC's Fund for Boston Schoolyards deal with a single source rather than having to apply separately to individual foundations for support.

Boston Schoolyard Initiative staff work on all the different components of each schoolyard build, including application, design, and construction, streamlining the process for both the

schools and the city. For example, BSI oversees both the bidding process and construction, limiting the amount of time school administrators have to spend coordinating these efforts.

### **Selection Criteria**

Schools are chosen by a selection committee composed of representatives from the city, the school district, and the BSFC. Their applications are evaluated on five criteria:

- School commitment
- Physical condition/geography
- Impact on school community
- Impact on health and recreation
- Stewardship

These factors help determine if there is evidence of principal buy-in, a long-term commitment to using the school grounds, an engaged school community, and plans to provide students with opportunities for outdoor physical exercise through recess and other programming. This helps to determine the school's level of engagement and buy-in.

### **Engaging Beneficiaries in Developing Sites**

Once a school is selected, the school receives a \$7,500 BSFC planning and community organizing grant. The grant pays for a part-time community organizer who can build human capacity and covers initial overhead for community outreach, such as phones, mailings, translation services, and events to attract potential stakeholders. The organizer also puts together a schoolyard group of beneficiaries.

The schoolyard group meets to discuss common community and school goals, concerns, and general issues. According to BSI, these often involve issues of security, along with the impact the improvements will have on nearby traffic patterns. Community engagement beginning at the planning stage creates a real sense of ownership and pride, says Meyer: "The Boston Schoolyard Initiative has proven that smart urban development can be a democratic process." Community members are more invested in looking after these spaces once they are completed. Russ Lopez, a researcher at Boston University, attributes the project's success largely to community and parental involvement.

From the beginning, BSI envisioned these playgrounds as both play and educational spaces. "Their proximity to schools cries out for a higher degree of interactivity, and they offer us the opportunity to combine recreation, creative play, and academic learning," BSI notes in its literature.

BSI worked with teachers, school administrators, environmentalists, attorneys, students, and community organizations to design a basic model of what the spaces should look like. Each playground is colorful, unique, interactive, and uses engaging focal points geared toward both students and local residents. Each of the redesigned playgrounds includes built structures and play equipment. Some include natural elements like boulders, trees, grass, and other plants. Features in the schoolyards are integrated into the curriculum. Tracks around the school offer math teachers the opportunity to teach students about circumference. Timing children as they run around the track helps teach calculation skills.

**Population of  
Boston:**  
589,141

**Population  
under 18:**  
116,649

# BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS: BOSTON SCHOOLYARD INITIATIVE

The features of each space are unique and specific to its community. Some spaces have brightly colored artwork. In some schools children elect to have maps of the globe painted on the asphalt. Meyer attributes the diversity in design to the diversity of Boston's student population. More than 24,000 of the system's 56,000 students speak a language other than English.

Once the design features are determined and the plan is selected, BSI construction projects go out for public bidding. To keep costs low and engage the community during the construction phase, many schoolyard groups hold "build days" where they paint, plant, and help install play equipment. The cost of a remodeled schoolyard ranges from \$100,000 to \$300,000, including design, groundbreaking, construction, and structures.

## Shared Use of Schoolyards

One of the initiative's goals is to create spaces that will be used by the entire community. With a federally mandated busing program in Boston, many children attend schools outside the neighborhood where they live. Schoolyards were largely abandoned after school hours and there was minimal connection between schools and local communities.

As the project developed, schools adopted a dawn-to-dusk policy, which opened schoolyard gates and allowed access after school hours. In rare cases, schools have been forced to lock their schoolyards due to serious safety concerns or vandalism.

Meyer and Julie Stone believe the benefits outweigh the occasional problems of this open door policy and that it generates a sense of community ownership. Recess volunteers at the Perkins School in South Boston agree. These parents and grandparents report there are enough people in the neighborhood who care about the space that troublemakers would be reported or punished.

## Building Political and Financial Capital

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative is popular with residents and has generated positive press coverage for the city and the school district.

"The Boston Public Schools usually had really unfavorable press," says Meyer. "There were always stories about crime or shootings. This was a really great break from the norm. And it wasn't only elected officials talking about doing something, it was the city, school district, and private sector collaborating to improve schoolyards and extend children's learning environment to the playground."

Initially, Mayor Menino promised five years of public funding. With continued private sector interest and support for BSI, the mayor chose to extend the city's financial commitment.

## SCALING UP

In developing the model, BSI identified the need to create a stronger connection between the schools' curriculum and the outdoor environments. In the early 2000s, BSI and the Funders Collaborative received a grant from a private funder interested in a high-visibility project at Boston elementary and K-8 schools. The funding enabled BSI to develop its outdoor classroom program, providing a rich environment for learning, curriculum resources, and professional development.



*Celebration of the new playground opening.*

**Population of Boston:**  
589,141

**Population under 18:**  
116,649

Programs for both students and teachers are structured around five content areas: natural environment, built environment, human communities, design and engineering principles, and community service. This comprehensive approach matches the guidelines of a large number of foundations and philanthropic organizations. In the past five years, BSI has developed nine pilot outdoor classrooms. Three more are on track to be built this year.

Outdoor classrooms with plants and trees offer lessons in biology and ecosystems. Natural elements such as log stumps become chairs. Tools such as rainwater collectors and compost bins teach sustainable gardening. Students might measure the schoolyard's perimeter to add a real-world dimension to math classes, or plant and care for trees to gain a better understanding of biology. Observing birdfeeders can lead to exercises in journaling and drawing.

The BSFC hired a full-time education director, Kristin Metz, to develop grade-appropriate resources, including activity guides, internet links, print and audio-visual materials, and opportunities to participate in local, national, or international projects.

Metz consulted with the head of the Boston Public Schools science department, ensuring that the activity guides complement the city's curricula. The outdoor classrooms have earned the program support from teachers and principals. The Boston Globe reported in 2008 that the children who respond best to the outdoor classrooms are often the ones who struggle most indoors. Julie Stone of BSFC says, "The schoolyard is a pivotal part in assisting children with learning challenges, whatever they might be."

Schools that renovated their schoolyards had a slight increase in students passing state tests over their peers at schools without BSI schoolyards, according to a 2008 study. University of Massachusetts researchers looked at fourth grade standardized math scores and controlled for school demographics. The study concluded that improving the outdoor environment of a school may improve students' performance.<sup>31</sup>

# BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS: BOSTON SCHOOLYARD INITIATIVE

Teachers report that these spaces also improve children’s social skills. Metz says that outdoor classrooms encourage students to interact with one another and become independent learners in a way that can’t be replicated indoors.

## SUSTAINABILITY

The mayor’s support for BSI has been critical to the sustainability of the program. He has jurisdiction over the city’s schools and has made funding BSI a priority and part of his educational reform agenda.

In the face of budget cuts, some school leaders and city residents have questioned the mayor’s priorities, asking, “*Why are we spending money on these now?*” says BSI Program Director Julie Stone. BSI has responded by trying to educate school leaders about the value of high-quality schoolyards and the impact of these playgrounds on learning.

Annual investment in BSI is estimated at \$1.2 million from the city and \$600,000 from the Funders Collaborative. The BSFC committed another \$600,000 to \$800,000 to underwrite outdoor classroom programs. As of June 2009, the project was on track to complete 85 schoolyards by August 2010.

School consolidation and the completion of schoolyard builds have reduced the volume of BSI applicants from upwards of 30 per year to fewer than 10. BSI now completes an average of six schoolyard projects every year. This decrease means each project can be completed within a year.

By many accounts from both the public and private sectors, the mayor’s support for BSI has been critical to its success. Menino provided close to \$16 million in public funding and attended nearly every ribbon-cutting ceremony for new schoolyards. These events generate local media attention, which continues to build awareness and public sector support, says Meyer.

### Maintenance

Since the program was first launched, BSI has developed systems to ensure program and site sustainability. These include a proactive maintenance program led by local users, specialized maintenance crews, ongoing education programs, and community and school engagement efforts that have led to each site’s users taking ownership of care and maintenance. At each school there is a “schoolyard friends group” with primary responsibility for care of the space. With support from the BSFC, many custodians and members of the schoolyard friends groups have completed greenspace management workshops, which BSI and Boston Public Schools have held over the past two years.

The creation of outdoor classrooms provided some initial maintenance challenges. In the early years of BSI, the school system’s regular grounds crews and “friends of” groups played a much larger role in maintaining each property. It became clear, though, that these spaces—especially those with outdoor classrooms—had more specialized needs. One outdoor classroom, for example, was almost entirely cut down because maintenance staff thought the natural grasses were weeds, according to Ross Miller, an artist and designer of the outdoor classrooms.

In response, the Boston Public Schools' Office of Facilities Management created the Boston Schoolyard Maintenance Crew. They are trained to use the special irrigation and maintenance equipment required for the outdoor classrooms and work with horticulture specialists to learn how to best care for these plants. The office spends about \$400,000 a year on maintenance and repairs.

### Replicability

Other cities are looking to replicate the Boston model. Oakland, California has launched the Oakland Schoolyard Initiative, which aims to transform 50 schoolyards over the next 10 years. Like Boston, Oakland plans to tailor each schoolyard to fit the specific needs of its community.

## OUTCOMES

More than \$4 million in private funds and close to \$16 million in public funds have been invested in designing and constructing comprehensive schoolyards across Boston. Mayor Menino has been the leading political champion for this effort, safeguarding resources during an economic downturn and positioning this project as part of this education reform agenda.

**Quantity:** Boston has constructed or reconstructed schoolyards and outdoor classrooms at 71 of the district's 130 schools, including almost 90% of the city's elementary schools. The play spaces cover 125 acres and serve almost 30,000 students. BSI is on track to have 85 schoolyards completed by 2010.

**Quality:** Improved outdoor spaces include comprehensive, age-appropriate play structures and green spaces that address educational, social, and cognitive development issues. They replace asphalt surfaces with limited play equipment.

**Access:** BSI has renovated schoolyards in each of the city's 15 neighborhoods. The 71 new play and educational spaces are open to the general public after school hours, serving over 90,000 children under age 14 living in these Boston neighborhoods.

## CORE FINDINGS

**Gather data to ascertain community and organizational needs.** Thoughtful community outreach and research allowed the task force to identify needs and opportunities, including the development of Boston schoolyards. This ensured a baseline of support, particularly from the environmental and health communities.

**Engage a key political ally early in the process.** By securing Mayor Menino's leadership early in the process, green space advocates were successful in building the political support necessary to secure public funding. This ongoing political support has helped to sustain the initiative through tighter budgetary periods.

**Involve the community and beneficiaries.** By inviting students, community members, parents, and teachers to participate in the design, construction, and maintenance processes, BSI helps to ensure that these spaces will meet the needs of the community and cultivate community ownership and pride.

Population of  
Boston:  
589,141

Population  
under 18:  
116,649

# BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS: BOSTON SCHOOLYARD INITIATIVE

**Create entities to streamline funding and implementation.** Creating one entity to manage public-private funding and another to implement design and construction improved efficiency of the process and helped deliver successful outcomes.

**Implement a sustainable maintenance program.** The program avoids costly errors by investing in training for students, interested residents, and maintenance crews. Adapting these programs as needs evolve is important.

**Develop curriculum geared toward learning standards.** Outdoor classrooms became increasingly successful as BSI developed activity guides based on the school's existing curriculum. The school district embraced the model, which offers teachers new ways to address curriculum requirements.

**Promote schoolyards improvement as tied to education reform.** Mayor Menino has retained funding for schoolyard construction in the face of budget cuts by linking these spaces to his education reform agenda. The approach has helped the initiative weather public criticism.

## CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS

Boston Schoolyard Initiative's sustainability is striking. The results-driven approach of this project has maintained donors' interest, while the mayor's efforts to tie high-quality schoolyards to his education reform agenda has helped validate its continuation in the face of budget cuts. Will the SBI be able to weather the current economic crisis as high-dollar donors cut back on giving? Menino is seeking a fifth full term as mayor in 2009. When he does eventually leave office, will this program have sufficient political support to weather a new administration with its own priorities? What will continued research show about this program's impact on children's learning?