

# TUCSON, ARIZONA: SHARING PLAY SPACE AND RESPONSIBILITY

## JOINT-USE AGREEMENTS INCREASE OPEN SPACE AND IMPROVE SAFETY

A joint-use agreement between the city and its largest school district increased access to play. As a result of this agreement, playgrounds have been upgraded to meet the city's safety standards. School athletic fields and open space at 12 elementary schools are now available to the community after school hours. This led to a reduction in the maintenance costs for participating schools, improved the safety of the school grounds, and increased the city's inventory of open space.

## CONTEXT: MORE PLAY SPACES—A CRITICAL NEED

Tucson prides itself on offering a high quality of life for residents. Tucson's Regional Economic Opportunities, Inc. (TREO) acknowledges that individuals and new businesses consider active living and recreation opportunities as factors when assessing a city's quality of life.

Tucson has a park space deficit. The city averages 6.2 acres of park per 1,000 residents, which is about half the national average. It is the nation's lowest ranking city when it comes to available park land among low-population-density cities. At the same time, Tucson's population is steadily increasing. This is especially true in the youth demographic. From 2000 to 2005, there was an increase of 10,000 residents in Tucson under age 18.

The rapid population growth combined with an existing park deficit has led to "a critical need to add to the existing parks and open space," according to the city's Parks and Recreation Ten-Year Strategic Plan. Focusing on this deficit, Tucson set a goal that every resident live within a half mile of a park or play space. The city also agreed to conduct a play space audit to survey available play spaces and determine areas in need of development. The play space goal and audit process were initiated by Annemarie Medina in the mayor's office.

Residents pressed elected officials to develop solutions to this play deficit. School Board Member Bruce Burke recalls community members advocating for access to their local high school tennis court so they could practice on the weekends. Concerned about liability and maintenance issues, school officials told the group—and many other groups—that they would have to find other places to play.

Despite the school's decision to restrict after-hours access, the school's fields and playgrounds were heavily used at nights, on weekends, and during the summer without explicit permission. Burke and his three daughters practiced soccer on their local school's fields on weekends. Roger Pfeuffer, the recently retired superintendent of the city's largest school district, publicly described helping his grandchildren hop their school's playground fence.

### Public Officials Respond to Need

Rodney Glassman ran for Tucson City Council in 2007, pledging to work on water conservation and public safety. During his campaign, constituents asked him to create more community-accessible parks and play spaces. He believed that addressing the citywide deficit of safe and accessible green space was an achievable goal and would make Tucson a better place to live, work, and raise a family.

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



*Kids and military volunteers enjoy a mudslide sponsored by the Parks and Recreation department.*

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Glassman campaigned on a promise to open up schoolyards after hours and during the summer. “The whole idea of having our neighborhood schoolyards locked was foreign to me until I moved to Tucson,” he says. “We’re recapturing our neighborhoods for our kids.”

Before running for office, Glassman had worked as a legislative aide for Arizona Rep. Raúl Grijalva. He was connected to numerous political stakeholders in Tucson. Glassman ran for city council with the unanimous support of the Tucson Unified School District School Board. The board became a key ally in his efforts to expand playground access in his district and throughout the city.

## THE INITIATIVE: PARTNERING TO PROACTIVELY ADDRESS THE DEFICIT

Once elected, Councilman Glassman began working on his campaign commitment to develop new park and play space. “This is something people were talking about for years and years,” he says. “We were finally able to move it forward because the city council and school board were both committed and because someone was willing to champion it.”

Glassman asked his staff to assess the available parks and play spaces that were fully accessible to his Ward 2 constituents. The assessment surfaced neighborhood schools as an opportunity. Almost all of the schools had fields, multiple playground structures and were in the middle of residential communities. These properties were inaccessible to the public as they were fenced, gated, and locked after school hours. “We have over 100 elementary, middle, and high school campuses with grass fields—but they’re surrounded by chain link fences and closed after 3 p.m., on weekends, and all summer long,” says Glassman. “My goal was to leverage the community resources that already existed and provide the opportunity for neighbors to enjoy them.” He presented the idea of creating joint-use agreements between the city and Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) to open these spaces to the community after school hours.

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The greater Tucson area is serviced by 14 autonomous school districts. Each has its own school board, superintendent, budget, and priorities. TUSD is the largest district in the region, with more than 100 schools serving over 60,000 students. Councilman Glassman selected TUSD because of its size as well as his strong relationships with its school board members.

In presenting the concept publicly, Glassman made a number of compelling arguments for the joint-use agreements. Children aren't just students, he said, they are members of the neighborhood and should have access to these playgrounds and fields. Secondly, he argued that this approach would create safer neighborhoods by encouraging a visible public presence in these areas at night and on weekends. Lastly, he argued that opening these spaces served a very basic need: increasing Tucson's open park space.

"There was simply no other way of opening numerous safe and accessible neighborhood playgrounds this quickly and at such little cost to the city," says Glassman.

With the encouragement of elected officials, city and school staff worked together to create community green spaces for children and families. Individuals involved in early discussions included TUSD Superintendent Roger Pfeuffer, City Attorney Mike Rankin, and Parks and Recreation Department Director Fred Gray, as well as Jim Conroy, the parks department administrator responsible for Ward 2.

## Negotiation of Joint-Use Agreement

The parks department has a long track record of forming joint-use agreements with all 14 school districts. But all previous agreements were for specific construction projects or improvements, according to Director Gray. "Those usually involved joint funding or one party providing the land and the other providing capital funding," he says. Elected officials were promoting a new type of agreement that would open up 12 existing play spaces for after school and summer use.

Under the plan, TUSD would continue to be responsible for maintenance and upgrade costs at all school playgrounds and fields throughout the school year. The city would then take over maintenance and equipment costs during summer months when school was not in session. In exchange, the schools would open gates or take down fences and make these spaces available to the public after school hours and on weekends.

"The additional sites expand the opportunities without significant capital investment," says Gray. "The benefits are increased opportunities for the general public to utilize additional playgrounds and school grounds for leisure and play."

The upfront expenses were minimal. "There were some minor repairs to some of the playgrounds, some additional playground surfacing added," says Gray. "Some of the athletic playing field surfaces needed to be smoothed out and we absorbed the costs of chemical applications for pre-emergent." He estimates that adding the sites to summer maintenance responsibilities cost about \$4,000 per schoolyard.

## Safety, Liability, and Community Issues

Some parents and school administrators were initially concerned that removing barriers to playgrounds would increase loitering, graffiti, vandalism, underage drinking on school grounds, and people not picking up after their dogs in areas used by children.

Superintendent Pfeuffer tried to allay these concerns by pointing out that people who wanted to get into the fenced areas would find a way to do so. He argued that it is the presence of people that reduces crime and vandalism after hours, not fences.

“TUSD had some concerns about the potential for increased vandalism, which had not been an issue to date,” says Gray.

Ultimately, the School Board unanimously supported the agreement. “It was good community relations,” says Bruce Burke, TUSD board member. “It was an opportunity to share with the community an asset we have across the city.”

City staff and TUSD asked the Tucson Police Department to do special checks on each schoolyard covered by a joint-use agreement. The police agreed, and their role was written into a memorandum of understanding (MOU). Barring any emergency, each school covered by a joint-use agreement would receive a police patrol and drive by on a regularly scheduled basis. This arrangement for additional law enforcement support helped with community buy in.

The other concern was one of liability. With a disparity between TUSD and city safety standards, the city agreed to pay for any equipment upgrades needed to bring schools into compliance with the city’s higher safety standards. Liability would rest with whichever entity was in charge of maintenance at the time. TUSD was responsible for liability issues during the school year while the parks department handled liability issues during the summer. “Liability issues could surface,” acknowledges Gray, “but both agencies are self-insured and the agreement calls for joint indemnification.”

Some neighbors expressed concern about proposed new night lighting in these playgrounds. Neighbors felt that the additional lighting could cause light pollution in their homes and be disruptive. After listening to the community’s feedback, city officials and TUSD representatives decided not to install nighttime lights and to rely, instead, on police surveillance.

After working through all the legal questions and other concerns, including those from TUSD, parents, community members, city staff and officials, and the police, the city attorney helped the parties form an intergovernmental agreement in the form of a MOU.

### **Implementation Success**

Once the agreement was in place, the city and TUSD identified schools for inclusion. TUSD is responsible for approximately 75 elementary schools throughout the city. The school board and superintendent aspired to create an agreement to benefit constituents across the city. However, with budget limitations, the joint-use agreements were limited to 12 school sites, two TUSD elementary schools in each of the city’s six wards.

“We wanted to select schools that would make a difference for our neighborhoods,” says Glassman. The parks department and TUSD selected schools that were furthest from other parks and playgrounds.

### **Opening of Schoolyards**

In June of 2008, 12 neighborhood elementary schoolyards opened for the summer season. According to Glassman, “There was big excitement from the kids that their neighborhood school had become their neighborhood park. It sends the right message.”

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According to school officials, these playgrounds are well-used after school hours. Bloom Elementary School Principal Diane Quevedo reports at least 30 people use the playground every evening at Bloom Elementary. Little League teams use the fields, while families with young children use the play equipment. In the mornings, elderly members of the community use the space for walking.

Community members are now taking greater ownership over maintenance and security. “They’re looking out for us now, taking care of us,” says Principal Quevedo, pointing to one recent incident. “We had 21 windows broken in the back of the school. A woman walking her dog brought it to the attention of police early on a Saturday. If the gates had been locked, she wouldn’t have been walking in the area and it wouldn’t have been noticed until Monday morning.”

## Promoting the Newly Opened Parks

Elected officials, parks department staff, and TUSD employees worked together to publicize these agreements and the newly available play space. Mayor Robert E. Walkup provided funding for signs that could be posted at each of the 12 school sites. Tucson’s public television channel broadcast announcements that the gates were coming down. Press releases in local newspapers generated earned media, and the city paid for some newspaper advertising.

At each participating school, there was a ribbon cutting ceremony to officially open the playground. At Bloom Elementary, Principal Quevedo reports that the celebration drew about 450 people, including students, community members, city council members, outgoing school superintendent Roger Pfeiffer, and new superintendent Elizabeth Fagan.

## Initial results

By all accounts, the school grounds are well-used by the community and there has been a reduction in vandalism. The increase in police surveillance is likely a factor, but school officials and city staff attribute higher usage rates to less vandalism. According to Annemarie Medina, the mayor’s constituent advocate, “When the playgrounds were locked up and infrequently used, kids were sneaking in and that’s when they would do the damage.” Medina says, “Now, knowing anyone can walk in at any time, they must be afraid of getting caught if they are doing something wrong, so they don’t do it. That was a nice by-product of the joint-use agreements!”

## SUSTAINABILITY

The longevity of this joint-use agreement was built into its design. The agreements themselves have a 75-year-long statute. For the next 75 years the Tucson Unified School District and the City of Tucson will share in maintenance and equipment upgrade costs along with liability coverage.

There is widespread support on both the city council and the school board to open additional playgrounds until every school campus is open. Mayor Walkup calls the arrangement a “worthy investment” and says he would support future expansion. However, Arizona was particularly hard hit by the recession, and the city is looking at 20% budget cuts. As a result, there are no funds available to open additional school playgrounds at this time.

## OUTCOMES

The City of Tucson and the Tucson Unified School District developed a joint-use agreement to open up new play spaces to the public. By sharing liability and maintenance responsibilities, the school district saved money while city residents benefited.

**Quantity:** Twelve neighborhood playgrounds and fields have been opened up to the community and general public. Each of the city's six districts now has two additional playgrounds, chosen specifically in communities with the largest deficit of play space.

**Quality:** Play equipment at these 12 playgrounds was evaluated and, where necessary, upgraded to meet the National Playground Safety Institute's guidelines. The spaces on these grounds now receive year-round maintenance support and are regularly patrolled by the police. Communities report reduced vandalism at schools with open schoolyards.

**Access:** Tucson has almost 130,000 residents under the age of 18. By opening the gates to playgrounds and fields in diverse locations and neighborhoods across the city, Glassman, the Department of Parks and Recreation, and the Tucson Unified School District have increased access to safe play spaces for thousands of Tucson children.

## CORE FINDINGS

**Conduct a play audit.** The city conducted a play space audit to identify areas in need of development.

**Engage key stakeholders early in the process.** By developing strong relationships with school board members before and during his campaign for city council, Glassman generated broad support for his playground proposal. He also sought police input before developing his plan. The police chief agreed to include police presence as part of the joint-use agreement.

**Engage the press.** The city and school officials publicized the school ground openings through earned and paid media. The local public television station also helped to promote the joint-use agreements.

**Clearly delineate liability, safety, and maintenance responsibilities in joint-use agreements.** The joint-use agreements outlined which safety codes applied to the playgrounds and specified entities responsible for liability and maintenance.

**Establish long-term agreements.** The city and school district built sustainability directly into the joint-use agreement by creating a 75-year statute.

## CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS

The arrangement between the city of Tucson and its largest school district provides a best practice example of using joint-use agreements to quickly establish new community parks at a relatively low cost. Communities and schools were selected based on below average access to other parks or open space. How many more people are now taking advantage of these newly opened parks and what kinds of tools can be used to measure usage? How do these agreements move the city toward its goal of having every child within a half mile of a park or playground? Finally, what other resources might be available to help the city expand the program to all schoolyards in Tucson?

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