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Final Evaluation Report

# Green Schoolyards for Healthy Communities

February 22, 2019

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# Green Schoolyards for Healthy Communities: Final Evaluation Report

**Project:** Children & Nature Network's Green Schoolyards Network Evaluation

February 22, 2019

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Children & Nature Network

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## Executive Summary

The Green Schoolyards for Healthy Communities Initiative (the Initiative) was a two-year program which aimed to create equitable community access to green spaces. The Initiative was funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Pisces Foundation, and created by the Children and Nature Network (C&NN) in partnership with the National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families. The Initiative pursued its goal by advocating for areas in or around schools with flora, fauna, and other natural and built elements. The Initiative involved a multidisciplinary group of leaders including educators, community leaders, social scientists, non-profits, government agencies, universities, and policy makers to advance its goals.

As the evaluation partner working with C&NN, New Knowledge Organization Ltd. (NewKnowledge) focused on i) Preliminary testing of the ongoing work in three pilot cities to create green schoolyards; and ii) Process evaluation of a growing cross-sectoral Network of allied professionals. Our findings in this final report speak to two years of evaluative activities, highlighting how the Initiative began to champion the positive impacts of unstructured outdoor learning through the inclusive, community-based interventions which acknowledge and value diverse perspectives. We observed an emerging Network of cross-sectoral professionals supporting an Action Agenda – these people are engaged and eager, and already see benefits of such a Network within their own organizations.

# Introduction

The Green Schoolyards for Healthy Communities Initiative (the Initiative) was funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Pisces Foundation, and created by the Children and Nature Network (C&NN) in partnership with the National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families in 2016. This funding supported a two-year program which aimed to create equitable community access to green spaces. The Kellogg Foundation funding concluded in December 2018. C&NN will continue to implement the Initiative's goals and will pursue additional support to do so.

The Initiative strived to accomplish its goal by advocating for areas in or around schools with flora, fauna, and other natural and built elements. The Initiative enlisted a multidisciplinary group of leaders including educators, community leaders, social scientists, non-profits, government agencies, universities, and policy makers to advance its goals.

Over the course of the two years, the Initiative aimed to support the development of:

- Green schoolyards, led by school administration, community partners, and other local organizations in a series of pilot cities (Austin, Texas; Providence, Rhode Island; Madison, Wisconsin; San Francisco, California; and Grand Rapids, Michigan).
- A cross-sectoral Network of multidisciplinary professionals to develop and implement an Action Agenda (Children & Nature Network, 2018) to advance green schoolyards across the US.
- Publicly available resources, such as the “Green Schoolyards Evaluation Framework” to assess the impacts of green schoolyards, which was informed by research on various benefits (e.g., academic, socio-emotional, physical, and mental health outcomes) of engaging with green spaces.
- A centralized Green Schoolyards Resource Hub to help guide and inspire municipalities and school districts to develop green schoolyard initiatives.

## Evaluation

New Knowledge Organization Ltd. (NewKnowledge) was the evaluation partner for the Initiative. Our work focused on i) Preliminary testing of the ongoing work in three pilot cities to create green schoolyards; and ii) Process evaluation of a growing cross-sectoral Network of allied professionals working to support the Action Agenda. The Action Agenda, curated by C&NN, aims to prioritize the funding, policy, communications and awareness-building needed to expand green schoolyards across the U.S.

Prior to conducting evaluative activities, we developed a brief report of the gaps in research on green schoolyards, especially with regards to community-level impacts (NewKnowledge, 2017). This review highlighted that while much research has been done concerning the connection between public green spaces and community engagement, research focusing on green space and cohesion within the smaller family unit is far more limited.

We then co-created a logic model (Figure 1) for the Initiative with C&NN, through virtual meetings. The logic model diagrammatically represents the components of the Initiative and was the basis for the evaluation framework and instruments we developed (Gupta, 2017). These components include the audiences C&NN plans to impact, the Outputs representing services or products created through the project, the Outcomes or short-term effects of these products, and the Impacts or long-term consequences of the initiative overall.

In Year 1, as part of the preliminary evaluation testing, we conducted observations at the Metric Advisors meeting and the Health and Equity Roundtable, and conducted our first of three on-site case studies through a focus group with a multidisciplinary team of five stakeholders who are developing green schoolyards in Austin, Texas (referred to as Green School Parks) (Gupta & LaMarca, 2018).

In the first half of Year 2 we conducted Phase 1 of the process evaluation to understand professionals' interest in supporting the cross-sectoral Network vision. We led a focus

group and a series of individual interviews with professionals who expressed interest in joining the cross-sectoral Network (Gupta & Ardan, 2018). At the close of Year 2 our final evaluation effort comprised Phase 2 of the cross-sectoral Network evaluation by conducting a focus group and an interview with the same group of individuals from Phase 1. Additionally, we conducted focus groups with stakeholders at two additional sites where green schoolyards are being built: one in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and the other in Providence, Rhode Island.

To provide context for interpreting the results of the evaluation, we note that the groups in Austin and Grand Rapids had made progress in their work on the Initiative,

whereas the Providence team participated in the evaluation at an early point in their work on the Initiative.

### This Report

In this final report, we summarize our previous evaluation findings from the preliminary evaluation testing and process evaluation. We also present new results from the conclusion of the process evaluation taking place from July 2018 – January 2019. We report here only on the work funded by the Kellogg Foundation.

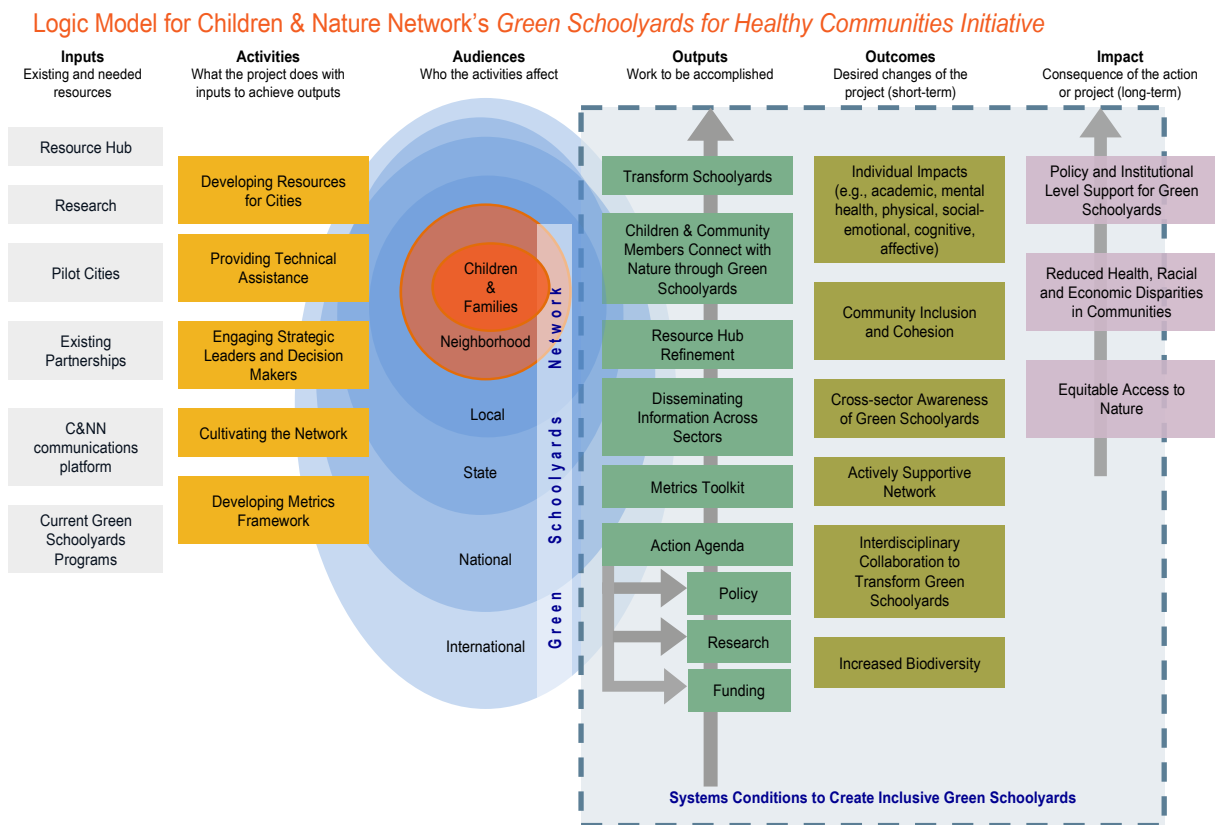


Figure 1. Logic model for the Green Schoolyards for Healthy Communities Initiative.

# Methods

## OBSERVATIONS

### Metric Advisors Meeting Observations

In January 2017, C&NN convened a daylong meeting in Raleigh, North Carolina with a multidisciplinary group of eight social scientists serving as Advisors for the Initiative. C&NN staff and a NewKnowledge researcher co-facilitated the group sessions with the aim of discussing the metrics framework for green schoolyards and identifying relevant outcomes and tools to assess their impact.

### Health & Equity Roundtable Observations

In July 2017, a second daylong meeting was convened to bring 21 professionals whose expertise related to the intersection of health and equity. The meeting aimed to a) Share perspectives on green schoolyards as informed from their expertise, and b) Raise awareness of the Initiative within this group and invite a subsection of attendees to join the Network.

Attendees engaged in discussions about the Initiative and a subset made formal presentations of their work to demonstrate the role of health and equity in engaging with nature in urban communities. C&NN sought feedback on their current process in creating green schoolyards with an effort to enable equitable community engagement.

## ONSITE PRELIMINARY EVALUATION TESTING

### Case Study 1: Austin

In November 2017, NewKnowledge conducted an in-person focus group in Austin, Texas, comprised of five participants from the local school district and parks department, all of whom had worked closely on the Green School Parks (GSP) effort.

## PROCESS EVALUATION OF EMERGING NETWORK

### Phase 1 Network Focus Group

In May 2018, C&NN invited a purposefully selected group of professionals – either interested or already engaged in the

Initiative – to participate in the Phase 1 Network focus group. All were attendees of the Green Schoolyards Action Area Breakout session at the 2018 International Leadership Summit in Oakland, California, and had expressed interest in supporting the Green Schoolyards Action Agenda that C&NN had developed.

Due to scheduling issues however, a focus group of all invitees was impossible, and a NewKnowledge researcher conducted two individual phone interviews and an in-person focus group with three professionals in Oakland before the Summit, along with two in-person interviews after the Summit.

Participants were affiliated with non-profits, city governments, or foundations, and shared a common interest in creating equitable nature spaces. Our discussion protocol asked participants about their initial impressions of green schoolyards as a concept, their anticipated collaboration with other professionals, and the support they need to help advance the work of the Initiative.

## FINAL EVALUATION ACTIVITIES

### Case Studies 2 & 3: Grand Rapids & Providence

We conducted an online focus group with three members of the Grand Rapids team developing green schoolyards in June of 2018. Later in the fall (November 2018), a NewKnowledge researcher conducted an in-person focus group with seven members of the team engaged in onsite development in Providence. The focus group protocol for these Case Studies can be found in Appendix A.

### Phase 2 Network Focus Groups

In December of 2019, we contacted six of the seven professionals we had engaged in the Phase 1 Network focus group to learn about their ongoing work with the Action Agenda. The seventh person was no longer affiliated with her organization. In January 2019, an online focus group was conducted with three people. The focus group protocols for both Phase 1 and Phase 2 Network Focus Groups can be found in Appendix B.

## ANALYSIS

The Metrics Advisor Meeting and Health and Equity Roundtable were attended by a NewKnowledge researcher, who was a participant observer in the sessions. Notes were taken of the discussions that took place and observations focused on the dynamics of the groups in interaction (where applicable) and the content and tone of the discussion. Observations were collated and are summarized.

Each Case Study focus group was transcribed and analyzed for emergent themes relating to the project outcomes surrounding the implementation of the project. The Network Focus Group was also transcribed and analyzed for consistent emergent themes relating to the project outcomes surrounding collaboration.



Figure 2. Attendees at C&NN's 2018 International Leadership Summit in Oakland reflecting on the Action Agenda. Photo credit: Jaime Zaplatosch

# Results

## SUMMARY OF OBSERVATIONS

A NewKnowledge researcher attended the following meetings in Year 1 as a participant observer and to learn how C&NN was engaging professionals across sectors in supporting the Initiative. These meetings were also used as an opportunity for NewKnowledge to assess and make recommendations for improvements for similar gatherings in the future.

### Metric Advisors Meeting

Participants in the Metric Advisor Meeting were a highly engaged group of social scientists who drew upon their rich individual backgrounds and expertise. They provided insightful comments and detailed questions about the metrics framework developed by C&NN and its broader scope. They were particularly interested in how the framework related to other project activities.

Some Advisors felt that focusing on the outcomes of the project detracted from their awareness of the collaborative processes which were intended to lead to those outcomes. NewKnowledge researchers also observed this gap and made recommendations to help future meetings connect the long-term outcomes of the Initiative with the project's processes leading to those outcomes.

### Health & Equity Roundtable

Similar to the Metric Advisors Meeting, attendees of the Health and Equity Roundtable were engaged and enthusiastic to learn more about the Initiative. They valued learning different viewpoints from colleagues with distinct disciplinary backgrounds and they agreed with the importance of finding tangible and shared outcomes that could guide the work.

This group of individuals were clearly aware and connected to the communities with whom they work. They asked questions and used language in relation to health and equity, reflecting a sensitive and nuanced understanding of the different groups at hand. As with the Advisors, this group too was interested in the development of the project to date and

raised insightful questions about the processes leading up to this point in the Initiative.

## ONSITE PRELIMINARY EVALUATION TESTING

### Case Study 1: Austin

#### *Value of Dynamic Learning Spaces*

Participants of the Austin focus group felt strongly about the benefits green schoolyards bring to a child's learning and development through self-guided exploration. They agreed that natural habitats and features in green spaces encourage visitors to explore. They related that dynamic to the biodiverse settings with flora and fauna that change seasonally which can help facilitate unstructured play which stimulates senses and piques interests. They felt a green schoolyard was a divergence from the typically static, more traditional schoolyards. They felt the Initiative would be particularly important for students who struggle in conventional classroom settings, and believed the GSP would have positive academic outcomes.

#### *Equitable Access for the Community*

Participants highly valued the green schoolyards. They felt they brought awareness, accessibility, and a shared sense of community to the area by building a learning environment that was beneficial to all ages and community members. Partners of the Initiative introduced students to a nearby park that was mostly unknown, highlighting the importance of accessibility not only as proximity, but also as awareness. Participants felt that the GSP sites are essential meeting places that are free and shared, and fulfill community needs of safety, connection, support, and cohesion.

#### *Transforming Communities & Challenging Norms*

Participants felt the GSP effort played a strong role in supporting community health as the wellbeing of both a community's inhabitants, and its environment and resources. They were aware of the benefits of outdoor experiences, and



believed GSP was offering new opportunities for outdoor learning while re-envisioning conventional ideas of “recess.”

The group also understood the importance of aligning GSP with the community’s goals and needs. They were aware of Austin’s Biophilic Living Initiative and stressed the importance and value of curating the green spaces to match community needs in order to develop calming, nurturing environments that provide restorative outcomes to alleviate daily tensions specific to the community.

#### *Collaboration*

All five participants shared common goals. They were motivated to create education opportunities, community engagement, conservation policies, and open spaces. These common interests facilitated trust between group members, which strengthened their sense of the group’s mission and further connected them to their community. The Austin based community they were working with is perceived as relatively cohesive, which helped them in engaging with their shared mission. The work of C&NN helped deepen this community cohesion, creating stronger relationships, and deeper connections between community members. We note that community leaders were seen as playing a particularly important role in activating the community.

#### *Additional Resources & Support*

Participants highlighted three factors that would help support their mission further. They felt time restrictions made organization particularly difficult, and understood the critical role of a logistics and organizational person on the team. They also valued the work of past pilot teams and requested more opportunities to communicate and engage with these peers moving forward. Lastly, they expressed concern about justifying their school choices, noting the importance of creating rubrics as resources, especially considering funding’s dependence on useful data. They called for future assessments of individual and community-level impacts of the Initiative.

## **Case Study 2: Grand Rapids**

### *Dynamic Learning Spaces*

The Grand Rapids group felt strongly about the inherent value for children of using nature in an educational way. They supported the use of green schoolyards, and of nontraditional play with the natural environment and natural elements, and also advocated for and promoted sustainability.

The group referred to nontraditional play spaces as places for play and learning without barriers between students and the natural environment. They discussed the importance of using nature in creative ways that others might not usually deem worthwhile, by integrating it with educational spaces. They felt like this type of experience and immersion in the natural environment allows youth to be more creative, to help them better express themselves, and to have more self-agency. One participant said, *“I think of green schoolyards as any place where students can be outdoors without barriers between them and their natural environment.”*

### *Equitable Engagement by the Community*

Participants felt that a hugely valuable component of the Initiative was involving the community in the work in order to get as many voices heard and concerns addressed as possible.

The Grand Rapids group discussed how the Initiative is allowing green schoolyards to address specific and unique community needs, such as specifically bringing attention and foot traffic to underused parks in the area, equipping students and teachers with the skills and resources to prioritize nature learning, and bolstering a sense of community in an area that has faced financial challenges. They highlighted that these capacities represent a new way of engaging the community in decisions, by listening and taking action, to truly incorporate into the Initiative the people who live in the community.

Participants also felt it was critical to pay close attention to community voices since the money is coming from the taxpayers. They asserted that, since community members are supporting and paying for this work, it is important to give back to the community in the most effective way. As one participant said, *“Our property is not ours, it is owned by the*



Figure 3. Space to Grow, a green schoolyards program in Chicago, IL. Photo Credit: Jaime Zaplatosch

*taxpayers... How do we welcome people to use the space beyond just soccer or kickball or manufactured playground?"*

#### *Transforming Communities & Challenging Norms*

Participants felt that this Initiative has been reaching success in supporting a shared sense of community through bringing people together in nature to learn and make decisions about their community. The group shared that, specifically in Grand Rapids, a sense of community had been diminishing due to a declining economy. They were impressed and surprised by the high level of community engagement when people are given the opportunity to be involved in community decision-making and projects where they are listened to and respected when considering the project's implementation.

They felt that involving the community in this type of work creates a sense of connection to the project and the park. According to the group, engaging students in this project, and acting as a voice for the work, contributes to the growing sense of community. Particularly, giving the community and youth the opportunity to advocate for their needs, and to be heard by decision makers, was extremely impactful in growing connections within the community and efficiently engaging those who live there.

Participants felt this work is transformative in connecting people with nature and breaking down barriers between people and the natural environment. By changing the way people think about interactions with nature and about the importance of play, green schoolyards appear to be impactful. They felt that having the community invest in this work brings

a greater connection to nature through new experiences and develops care about the space.

They also felt it was a big deal to be advocating for sustainability and successfully implementing these ideas through impacting policy and getting the local government invested. They felt grateful to have the leadership to support such an initiative. One said they were happy to have *“the leadership to buy into this commitment and recognize why it’s helpful for teachers, students, and communities. We’re fortunate we’ve had a mayor and superintendent committed to this and other environmental projects.”*

#### *Collaboration*

The participants talked a lot about the importance of working together with other organizations in order to agreeably define what the Initiative is and what it means. Although they expressed that it is complex to deal with numerous large organizations coming from different cultures, rules, and working styles, they felt that everyone’s goals are aligned. In addition, they felt everyone is supportive, committed to the work, communicative, welcoming, and helpful toward each other.

When obstacles came up, the team was committed to working through them together. One person commented, *“I would say everyone comes with the same goal. We can run into obstacles but we’re all committed to working through those.”*

#### *Additional Resources & Support*

Participants’ most notable response when asked about what additional support they could use was for funding and resources such as teacher training, stipends for professional development, and resources for best practices. They also expressed a desire to have more resources and funding for the youth ambassador program.

### **Case Study 3: Providence**

#### *Dynamic Learning Spaces*

Overall, focus group participants in Providence seemed engaged and excited to be part of the project. At the time of the focus group, the Providence group were still putting structures in place and identifying the right partners to be at

the table before beginning planning and implementation. Although their work is still in progress, they all defined green schoolyards as dynamic and vibrant spaces that are constructed to respect all who use them, and not only enhance students’ education but provide a safe space for the entire community. Several participants spoke about the benefits of using outdoor spaces as classrooms, and incorporating them into the curriculum, stressing that learning outdoors greatly enhances social development and the overall physical and emotional health of students.

They also addressed climate, particularly how many students from predominately immigrant families are overtly used to being outdoors. Participants felt that redefining the outdoors into a learning environment is going to demand a shift in mentality. One participant suggested that providing incentives for teachers to engage with the outdoors – especially in the winter when it’s not ideal to be outside – could help ease the mental shift and make learning outdoors more desirable, as well as help combat what one participant called *“cabin fever”* during the winter months.

#### *Equitable Access for the Community*

Participants most frequently addressed the issue of equity within their community. Most people agreed that specific community needs and the overall feeling of the project within each community have to be major priorities and be used to thoughtfully construct an action plan. They all stressed the importance of not acting as an outside force but instead, putting the community’s needs first.

More specifically, participants attempted to define broad community needs by addressing minorities, absenteeism, lower income areas, communities’ previous relationships with the larger city of Providence and its politics, and the struggles communities have been facing during the most recent financial crisis. Each topic was addressed but no solutions fully suggested. Overall, participants pointed out that each of these needs, and others pertaining to each individual community, have to be first acknowledged and addressed before moving forward to enhance or construct any green spaces.

Lastly, participants were concerned about the school selection process for green schoolyards. They questioned

which schools were being selected and for what reasons. A couple of participants suggested that it's often the schools with the "loudest principals" that are selected for these opportunities; however, the schools that need these spaces the most are often the most resistant to change.

#### *City-Wide Impact*

Beyond looking at individual community needs, participants discussed how this project already does and will in the future impact the city of Providence as a whole.

Participants discussed the city's history of political unrest and how certain communities have suffered as a result. They believed it would be difficult to mend those bonds quickly, but are hopeful that work could and should be done. By providing resources for schools and communities, like green schoolyards, participants believed wounds could heal and skeptical attitudes about funding and prioritizing community needs could be overcome.

Participants also recognized the issue of resident versus non-resident stakeholders in green schoolyards, for families whose children attend one school but the family lives in a different neighborhood and how to make sure their voices are not ignored.

Furthermore, participants hoped that successful green schoolyards projects could act as role models for future public works projects and spark further collaboration among communities, governments, funders, and more organizations.

#### *Collaboration*

Participants expressed concerns and questions about the outreach methods they could use to engage communities in green schoolyards. One suggestion of how to support the Initiative was to produce an online handbook that would help individuals and organizations start a green schoolyard in their community. They also felt it would be helpful to consider how to showcase the Initiative as a storytelling opportunity to engage community members and attract further audiences and potential funders.

Concerns were also voiced about communication within schools and how it is often one teacher, staff member, or only the principal propelling the initiative and trying to get

everyone else on board. Participants were interested in brainstorming strategies to help involve the entire school faculty so not as to rely on the efforts of one person – especially if that person ends up retiring or moving away.

#### *Additional Resources & Support*

When asked about additional resources or support to engage with the Initiative, participants felt it was important to consider how to include new neighborhoods, how to establish outside partnerships, and how to develop strategies to re-engage communities after slow-downs in the process.

Larger concerns included issues of time, safety, sustainability, priority funding, maintenance, and issues surrounding soil toxicity. Soil toxicity has previously been addressed by the city government but participants suggested that families remain nervous about exposing their children to the outdoors. This apprehension would have to be addressed in communities prior to digging up dirt to build green schoolyards. Similar to the Austin group, Providence participants felt it was important to be clear about the main message green schoolyards are trying to project.

## **PROCESS EVALUATION OF EMERGING NETWORK**

### **Phase 1 Network Focus Group**

#### *Perceptions of Green Schoolyards*

Interview and focus group participants felt the most important intent of the Action Agenda was to support children's capacity to grow as healthy and happy learners. They described specific ways children can be impacted by green schoolyard interactions such as engaging in creative play, improving their health, creating emotional connections with nature, and developing a lifelong environmental ethic. Additionally, one participant noted how access to nature in underserved communities can in turn provide health benefits. Children were also seen as potential ambassadors, imbued with the possibility of motivating and inspiring their families and communities to engage with the Initiative.

#### *Cross-Sector Awareness*

Interdisciplinary collaboration toward the achievement of the Action Agenda was recognized as vital. Participants valued

the cross-sectoral group and varied voices in the shared vision and fulfillment of the Initiative's mission. They felt that further extended toward their audiences as well, and acknowledged the importance of engaging with a range of stakeholders, including children and families.

Saying that, participants acknowledged the inevitability of differences in opinion among partners and the need to engage thoughtfully, purposefully, and respectfully, with the potential inclusion of a facilitator or mediator throughout the process. They felt that identifying common and core goals would be critical to the Initiative's impact.

#### *Supporting the Green Schoolyards Network*

Participants valued the framework outlined in the Action Agenda and were able to describe the resources and support they anticipated needing to fulfill it. This support included leveraging existing data on green schoolyards, creating summaries of peer-reviewed publications on the matter, identifying gaps in knowledge to instigate further study, and understanding existing policies that may impact the Initiative. They felt it would behoove the Network if it were able to gather these resources, without having to rely solely on C&NN.

They also mentioned and emphasized the importance of creating good communication pathways between Network members, and realistic shared responsibilities. Some participants expressed the importance of funding and working with funders. All participants acknowledged the role of evidence in understanding the progress of the Network, explaining its value in learning about best practices and uncovering aspects that need refinement. They also highlighted the role of evidence in storytelling and capturing hearts to secure future funding.

#### **Phase 2 Network Focus Groups**

##### *Support of Action Agenda*

Participants detailed a lot of momentum in their organizations and projects, but stated that they had not explicitly advanced the action items outlined in the Action Agenda. One participant looked at the Agenda during the focus group and remarked that all of their endeavors have corresponded to the Agenda but not intentionally. Participants stated that they like

having the Action Agenda as a way of connecting themselves to the other partners but they have not advocated for it actively in their work.

##### *Policy Changes for the Initiative*

The majority of participants stated that their work has indirectly supported policy changes, but that policy change has not been a focused goal for any of them. However, there have been positive instances of policy change such as Space to Grow, which has committed to building 34 schoolyards by 2022, and garner support from international groups (e.g., they hosted individuals from Paris who pledged to share practices as they relate to green schoolyards). This international interest in this area has helped participants gain mayoral support to develop a strategy to mitigate floodwaters in their city. Furthermore, Space to Grow has made recommendations for the incoming mayor and governor by directly citing the Action Agenda.

##### *Supporting More Funding for Green Schoolyards*

Participants detailed their funding sources, which included endowments, grants, private organizations, and fundraising activities within their own organizations. Space to Grow stated that without fundraising on their own, they would not have enough resources to continue working on their program.

##### *Communication & Research on Green Schoolyards*

Partners rely heavily on social media, newspapers, and word of mouth to promote green schoolyards. They all admitted that more intentional steps must be made to communicate about green schoolyards and that none have really committed time to doing so yet.

However, participants remarked how C&NN has been a huge help in supporting their research. While some of the partners don't utilize the databases, others were excited to report that they have used C&NN's resources to investigate storm water, health, wellness, and broader topics surrounding green spaces as classrooms.

### *Overall Progress & Partnerships*

Overall, developing and working with partners has been essential to promoting projects and accomplishing goals.

Participants were happy to report that they explicitly prioritize goals of equity in their work. One organization started using equity audits of their own policies and practices to ensure standards are being met to address community needs.

Space to Grow reported that there has also been a lot of buy-in from policy makers on the city level, which has helped to attract other cities that are interested in developing their own green schoolyards.

### *Additional Resources*

All participants stated that they would benefit from a more collaborative partnership with other partners working towards the Action Agenda to learn what others were doing to accomplish their goals and to communicate more directly with each organization. They suggested that examples from other partners showcasing successful projects would be a good way to keep in touch, highlight success, promote the spread of effective practices, and support further communication. None of the participants had connected with each other since the last meeting and they noted this was an obvious disconnect. A more direct way for partners to communicate and collaborate would greatly enhance their productivity, creativity, and overall momentum.

## Discussion & Recommendations

Through the Green Schoolyards for Healthy Communities Initiative, C&NN has developed a set of model strategies to shift the national landscape on prioritizing green schoolyards and spur community-wide health impacts. Over the course of two years, the evaluation studies shed light on two effective strategies: on-site support for green schoolyard development and facilitation of a Network to advocate for system-level change to prioritize green schoolyards as a national agenda.

### ONSITE GREEN SCHOOLYARDS DEVELOPMENT

Three case studies across Austin, Grand Rapids, and Providence highlighted distinct ways in which the process of developing green schoolyards had progressed over the two years of funding. The urban sites presented three unique contextual and cultural settings where we observed the creation and evolution of green schoolyards. Although these sites were indeed unique – Austin, for example reframed their project as Green School Parks instead of schoolyards to be more relevant to their community – they also shared commonalities.

Across the three sites, we noted that cross-sectoral groups of individuals were part of the development process, highlighting the Initiative's **attention to diverse perspectives and voices** to inform the park development process. Groups typically involved school staff, administrators, local park departments, city government officials, and importantly, community members who were not necessarily in leadership roles. Indeed, relationship-building among different groups of partners was deemed extremely important for all planning teams: the Austin and Grand Rapids groups described this priority with the unfolding process, while the Providence team reflected on potential partners to engage with.

It is promising for the Initiative in the long run that the need to engage community members was articulated explicitly across sites, ensuring that the green space to be created served these members appropriately. In Austin and in Grand Rapids, where the green schoolyards development had already started, **inclusive approaches were used**, whereby

community members were deeply involved in the planning process, making it a community-driven effort. In fact, in Grand Rapids, the youth-led aspect of the project was a source of pride and joy for the group as they described how the school students had taken ownership. In Providence too, where the work was in the planning stage, the group felt it was imperative that community partners be part of the process.

The most palpable benefits for the communities were in **empowering community members** to shape the newly designed green spaces, and as a result **creating access** to nature spaces where there was a deficit before. The individual-level benefits were inferred at the time of the evaluation, described namely as expected benefits of unstructured outdoor learning. However, the planning groups were vocal about how they anticipated these spaces to facilitate more social opportunities, as well as provide restorative spaces for the students and their communities to enjoy.

### EMERGING NETWORK TO SUPPORT THE ACTION AGENDA

We heard from a core group of professionals who see long-term value in the Initiative and are interested in being part of a Network to support the Action Agenda. This **emerging Network** was fostered through a series of meetings, where C&NN strategically engaged a multidisciplinary group of professionals whose expertise is relevant to developing green schoolyards. They include social scientists, public officials, school representatives, and policy makers, among others, whose work is relevant to developing green schoolyards in equitable ways to impact community-health and wellbeing.

The meetings emphasized the need for a **multi-pronged effort to champion green schoolyards for communities**. The priority areas include advancing research on green schoolyards, advocating for policy changes, creating strategic communications to raise awareness of green schoolyards, and creating funding opportunities. These are articulated in the Action Agenda that C&NN has shared with the emerging

Network, designed to move forward the goal of building a national priority to develop green schoolyards.

Eight months after their initial introduction to the Action Agenda, three members of this core Network group, whose professional work helped children engage with nature spaces, reflected on their work with it in relation to their individual professional contexts. While they had not yet explicitly advocated for C&NN's Action Agenda, they had implemented aspects of it in their professional work. For example, they had been involved in creating structures in their professional work to support developing green schoolyards in a collaborative, cross-sectoral way. In that sense, these professionals are starting close to home to move the Agenda forward using resources and professional networks in ways that are relevant to their organizational context.

We see the core group of Network members as **informed observers** of the impact in their work of taking a strategic approach to developing green schoolyards. For now, they are excited about the long-term value in implementing the lessons learned in their own work. We anticipate, as a result, they will likely be **reliable advocates for the Action Agenda in the future**, having first hand experienced the benefits of using C&NN's model.

Saying that, the group felt that they **need further clarity and direction from C&NN to take specific steps** towards advancing the Action Agenda. They seemed to appreciate this tool on a theoretical level, but were unsure about the logistical aspects of taking appropriate action. In spite of this concern, the group perceived value in being more connected with each other to advance their respective green schoolyards projects, but also to collectively advance the Action Agenda.

Over the course of two years, we saw C&NN make promising movement towards supporting onsite green schoolyards to meet communities' needs and the evolution of a Network of professional advocates for green schoolyards.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To further support and advance the work that has already started, we make the following recommendations.

### Onsite Green Schoolyard Development

- Share lessons across urban sites to facilitate exchange of lessons learned from each site; connecting with others involved in similar work will help reduce the isolation and uncertainty that individual sites may experience as they advance their work.
- Disseminate best practices learned as case studies and / or exemplars for newer sites to engage in the process, so they have models to draw from and a tangible understanding of the process that the Initiative may entail.
- Engage key partners from sites that have developed or are in the process of developing green schoolyards to be part of the Network and to be future advocates; their first-hand knowledge and experience with the process and anticipated impact make them credible and trusted advocates to advance green schoolyards nationally.

### Fostering the Green Schoolyard Network

- Provide guidance, structure, and examples of how Network members can advocate for green schoolyards in contexts beyond their individual work; this input will help set expectations for deliverables or outcomes that teams should be working towards.
- Encourage Network members to leverage their ongoing work with C&NN on green schoolyards as entry points to support the Action Agenda on a broader scale; by aligning their work on the Action Agenda with their existing efforts, we anticipate the Action Agenda will be added value to their professional work without being perceived as an additional responsibility.
- Facilitate social and networking opportunities for the Network members; by connecting them they can more effectively learn and share from each other, as they help develop green schoolyards in their work and more broadly.
- Engage Network members in expanding the group of ambassadors who can advocate for the Action Agenda; though this is a future goal, we expect this effort will help build a sense of ownership and leadership among members in this effort.



## Conclusion

Efforts toward the implementation of the Green Schoolyards for Healthy Communities Initiative from 2016 to 2018 have shown positive potential in the creation and fruition of green schoolyards. Three evaluation case studies highlighted how unique green schoolyard efforts were created in different contexts across the US. The evaluation results revealed the power of inclusive, community-based interventions which acknowledge and value a diversity in perspective, coupled with the benefits of unstructured outdoor learning.

Additionally, the assembly of an emerging Network of cross-sectoral professionals working toward the support of an Action Agenda was beginning to take root; these professionals already saw the benefits within their own organizations.

The strides taken by the Kellogg Foundation and Pisces Foundation-funded Initiative and the seeds it has planted to facilitate, implement, and integrate green schoolyards into communities have the potential to continue to deepen and grow.

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