

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative: A Public-Private Partnership for Rebuilding Urban Play Spaces

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Abstract The Boston Schoolyard Initiative (BSI) is a policy effort to rebuild school yards in Boston through innovative citywide public-private partnerships. At the center of the initiative is a commitment to engage multiple stakeholders and utilize a bottom-up planning process to encourage meaningful change. Based on a case study of BSI, this article develops a framework to understand and analyze how different school and neighborhood sectors can partner to benefit neighborhood communities and utilize the built environment to encourage more active living and active learning. The article contributes to a literature that focuses on the effects of school yards and the role of physically active environments on learning. It expands on this literature by looking at the school-yard initiative as a way to build and expand relationships between teachers, parents, and the community at large. Finally, the study shows that even older schools in inner-city neighborhoods, previously considered blights, can be turned into community, educational, and political assets.

This article is an assessment of the Boston Schoolyard Initiative (BSI) as an innovative policy effort aimed at rebuilding school yards in Boston through a citywide public-private partnership. Based on a case study of BSI, we develop a framework to understand and analyze how different school and neighborhood sectors can coalesce on behalf of the children and the neighborhood. We propose that school yards represent unique

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urban spaces that offer the possibility for innovative building of civic collaboration with important social and community advantages. At the center of the initiative is a commitment to engage multiple stakeholders and utilize a bottom-up planning process in order to encourage meaningful change.

This case study reviews the context in which BSI took shape and the influences upon its development, identifies key features of the policy initiative that distinguish its operation, discusses BSI in relation to contemporary issues in the area of active living, and explores the potential relevance of BSI to other settings and urban-policy issues. This article contributes to a literature that focuses on the effects of school yards and the role of physically active environments on learning. It expands on this literature by looking at school-yard initiatives as a space for building collaboration between teachers and parents and providing opportunities for neighborhood residents to become more involved with school and community issues.

School yards are an ideal place for igniting and nurturing community collaboration, because they are spaces in which many different interests can come together. Furthermore, school yards are spaces in which school personnel, essential for any successful school-based initiative, can learn about the community and what is occurring outside the classroom (Rutter 1983; Riehl 2000). Schools and their open spaces can either boost a neighborhood by showcasing the results of a community that prioritizes its children and schools, or they can add to the malaise that affects many inner-city neighborhoods by communicating a continuing pattern of decline and disinvestment. Furthermore, the process of organizing to revitalize school yards itself can contribute to community resources. It can assist in building bridges between schools and their communities and bring a renewed focus on the environmental challenges that confront inner-city residents.

We propose that the net effect of collaboration and participatory efforts that are based in a community space like school yards points to environmental change that leads to simultaneous improvement in the school and neighborhood settings (Kloos et al. 1997). Using school yards creatively and with community support, schools are better able to meet the challenges of attracting resources and educating their students (Kahne et al. 2001). Very important, the school environment itself can be transformed into a learning asset for children and their communities (Weinstein 1988; Brink and Yost 2004).

There have been efforts to study how outdoor learning environments can improve learning. The physical attributes of a school can benefit chil-

dren, providing that institutional and organizational barriers to the use of school yards for active learning can be overcome (Dyment 2005). Furthermore, effective use of school yards requires an appropriate in-school philosophical environment that recognizes the value of this type of education (Malone and Tranter 2003). There is also evidence that particular types of environments, such as gardens, can assist students with learning (Rahm 2002).

The psychological effects of a degraded environment and, conversely, the impact of an improved school yard cannot be minimized (Kozol 1991). The context of poverty at the neighborhood level is an important influence on the emotional development of children (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Physical indexes of poverty, combined with illegal or illicit activities, are seen to play a role in collective feelings of hopelessness and despair (Wandersman and Nation 1998). The self-esteem and sense of hope in children is likely to be undermined by conditions and settings that signal membership in a disadvantaged group or act as public cues of stigmatized status (Wiltfang and Scarbez 1990; Kotlowitz 1991). Further, there is extensive research on childhood obesity and a general consensus that improving physical activities in schools must be part of a comprehensive, society-wide strategy for improving children's health (Sherry 2005; Anderson and Butcher 2006; Flodmark, Marcus, and Britton 2006; Flynn et al. 2006).

Another related strand of literature focuses on civic capacity and community participation to mitigate the effects of poverty. A community-based participatory process can increase the capacity of neighborhood institutions to meet the challenges facing their communities (Chavis and Watersman 1990; Rich, Giles, and Stern 2001; Jennings 2004). A basic part of this improvement comes from the way community organizing affects neighborhood social capital and the general networks of trust and cooperation that are created and enhanced (Gital and Vital 1998). In particular, parental involvement, a form of community organizing, can contribute to improved schools (Lopez 2003).

Methodology

The purpose of this case study is to describe the BSI as a policy initiative within the context of active-living programs and literature. By identifying the distinguishing features of BSI and perceived strengths and weaknesses, the case study seeks to provide information that may have relevance for other locales and related urban-policy issues. The case study is an optimal approach for investigating active-living programs in a variety of settings.

As a research strategy that examines contemporary phenomena within a real-life context, the case study relies upon multiple sources of evidence to gain detailed knowledge of a complex issue (Yin 2002). The case study method has been used to investigate public policy in a variety of areas, including civic mobilization (Stone et al. 2001) and urban school systems (Portz, Stein, and Jones 1999).

Data collection for this study relied upon three principal research methods: (1) in-depth interviews with key informants, (2) document analysis, and (3) personal observations based on site visits. Prior to the formal data collection phase of research, the study team met with BSI staff to gather background information on BSI history and operations, identify key stakeholders and potential interview subjects, and establish the research framework for the case study. Periodic meetings were held with BSI staff throughout the research process to ensure that the implementation of initiatives and related developments were understood by the research team. These meetings facilitated access to data and information about the various sites.

We used exploratory meetings at the start of the research project, review of literature germane to the topic, and news articles about school yards in Boston, to develop interview protocols to guide formal interviews. Interviews were designed to be semistructured, utilizing a core set of questions in key areas but allowing flexibility for subjects to raise unanticipated issues or to speak in-depth in areas in which they had particular insights or experience. Separate interview protocols were developed for school and nonschool interview subjects. Each interview protocol included a series of questions in four areas: (1) background, (2) perceptions of the BSI process, (3) perceptions of results, and (4) impressions of future directions of BSI, including important lessons and recommendations. The protocols were designed for interviews to be completed within sixty to ninety minutes. The survey protocol and interview questions were approved by Boston University Medical Center's Institutional Review Board in November 2005.

During the first six months of 2006, we conducted sixteen interviews with school personnel (both from schools with projects and from schools without projects) including teachers, staff, and administrators. Other interview subjects included community organizers, funders, environmental educators, landscape-design architects, and personnel from Boston city government, all of whom had some personal involvement in BSI. A combination of purposive sampling methods was used to identify interview subjects in three waves. An initial range of subjects was selected because they represented critical cases who were believed to be key informants

with unique insights into or experiences with BSI. In the next phase of interviews, criterion sampling was used to ensure representation from all stakeholder groups, with the exception of children. Finally, several stakeholders were identified by opportunistic sampling methods based upon recommendations from previous respondents. In addition to interviews with BSI personnel, we studied BSI's program files and archives and the limited literature available on school environments. Documents included journal and media reports on the project, BSI publications, and transcripts from interviews and focus group sessions that were conducted with a range of BSI participants and stakeholders as part of an earlier assessment of BSI.

The research team conducted site visits for the majority (over forty sites) of school-yard projects. While it was not possible to measure the extent to which they have been used, it was very easy to distinguish between renovated and unrenovated schools because renovated school yards had landscaping, minimal broken-pavement areas, and high-quality play equipment. Unrenovated school yards tended to have pavement in disrepair, few plantings, and antiquated play equipment, if any. In order to observe any physical patterns between the sites and neighborhoods in Boston, the locations of finished projects were mapped using Geographic Information Systems software. The social and demographic characteristics of surrounding census tracts were obtained by accessing U.S. census data. This information proved useful in making comparisons between actual sites of school-yard initiatives and broader neighborhood areas. School-based demographic data was obtained directly from the Boston School Department to assist with comparisons of renovated school profiles and the school system.

The Boston School Initiative Sites

The initiative's sites are geographically distributed throughout the city and its neighborhoods. The figure shows that BSI sites are found in sixteen of the city's seventeen neighborhoods.

As table 1 illustrates, the children served at BSI sites reflect the general school population.

Most of the 58,000 public students are nonwhite and poor. Together, African Americans, Latinos, and Asians comprise at least 77 percent of the Boston public-school population. Further, almost three-quarters (73 percent) of the school population qualify for free or reduced school lunches (Boston Public Schools 2006).

Table 1 Boston Schoolyard Initiative (BSI): Demographic Information

	All Boston Public Schools	Schools with BSI Projects
Schools	130	58
Total students	58,600	24,832
Asian	9%	7%
African American	46%	48%
Hispanic	31%	34%
Students with free/reduced-price lunch	74%	71%

	All Boston	Census Tracts with BSI Projects
Total population	589,141	213,587
Asian	7%	6%
African American	23%	26%
Hispanic	14%	19%

The data suggests that BSI sites are not demographically different from the overall student population for the entire city. The initiative was successfully able to implement projects serving all demographic groups in the schools and in the city as a whole. It is important to note that the sites are located in the most impoverished sections of the city.

Urban Context for the Emergence of the Boston Schoolyard Initiative

In the early 1990s, Boston school yards were almost uniformly in an abysmal state and generally victims of tight municipal finances. Upkeep for school yards lacked advocates who could exert influence in the face of more urgent needs facing public schools in the city. Rather than inviting active uses or serving as valued community resources, school yards were unsafe and unsightly sore spots. Many of these places reflected neglect and were treated as wasted urban spaces. Many school yards were littered with trash and broken glass and play structures were standing on broken asphalt (Easley, Evans, and Heatherly 2005). During these earlier periods, school yards seemed to be undervalued as a social and civic resource for the neighborhood and overlooked as an arena in which parental participation could be encouraged and supported. In some locales, school yards were simply used as parking lots. In the face of this neglect, school yards

were more likely to be venues for gang or illicit activity than for recreational use by schoolchildren or neighborhood residents.

Beginning in the 1950s and accelerated by budget cutbacks in the 1960s and 1970s, thus occurring in the middle of racial controversies about busing, schools in minority neighborhoods were closed or undermaintained (King 1981). Many schools in these neighborhoods were in the most run-down condition of the entire system and were often sold off to save on maintenance costs or to raise needed dollars for city budgets. Even before busing and ensuing violence erupted, African American, Latino, and other children of color faced long rides to distant, overcrowded schools. The violence that accompanied busing affected the physical conditions of the school and certainly the school yards. Along with civic inattention, budget problems led to ever-deteriorating conditions.

The mayoral takeover of the schools in the 1980s, resulting from changing to an appointed body of five school committee members rather than an electoral one, did not immediately rectify the school-yard situation. The schools were isolated from their surrounding neighborhoods, avoided by all who could distance themselves from them. Many of Boston's densest and poorest neighborhoods had few recreational resources, but the construction of new parks was confounded by the expense of acquiring land and building new facilities and the possibility that it might have entailed demolition of housing. The desolate school yards represented one of the few publicly owned resources available to improve opportunities for physical activity in the neighborhoods.

Emergence and Organization of the Boston Schoolyard Initiative

This social and racial context and the convergence of several factors helped set the stage for pushing the plight of Boston school yards into the policy arena in the early 1990s. First, public-school parents were becoming increasingly concerned about school-yard safety, with some advocates arguing that public schools would never staunch the flow of middle-class children to private schools without making improvements in highly visible school yards. Second, open-space advocates in Boston's dense urban neighborhoods were looking for land that could be reclaimed for community use. Third, some private funders who were accustomed to underwriting beautification projects in Boston's downtown and wealthier districts began to recognize the importance of targeting funds to neighborhood development in outlying areas. Fourth, the administration of Bos-

ton mayor Thomas Menino—who had assumed office after serving nine years on the city council—prided itself on its community advocacy and was committed to spurring physical and economic development in the city's neighborhoods.

A key development in encouraging a more positive approach regarding school yards as a resource for neighborhoods and the city occurred in 1994. At this time, a task force funded by private donors issued a report recommending the utilization of public-school land for community open space and use. Subsequently, a coalition of school and community activists and private funders approached Mayor Menino in late 1994 to press a vision for turning the city's dilapidated and little-used school yards into vital spaces for children, families, and neighborhood residents. Pointing out that grassroots efforts to refurbish school yards were already underway at individual schools, they proposed a more systematic approach to school-yard redevelopment by bringing the city and private funders into a collaborative venture, thereby infusing the effort with capital, administrative support, and vision. Menino was sufficiently impressed by the proposal that he quickly appointed a cabinet-level task force to plan for the creation of a public-private partnership that would oversee school-yard revitalization. This marked the beginning of BSI.

The task force was jointly convened by the mayor's office and the Boston Greenspace Alliance, a local organization that had a reputation for advocating for the environmental needs of diverse communities. The task force was staffed by a representative of Boston Greenspace Alliance and a representative of the Boston Public Facilities Department, the city agency that would be responsible for planning and implementing improvements. Both individuals were familiar to neighborhood activists and civic leaders and committed to community-based planning. Both also had a history of working closely with the mayor and other high-level staff in city government.

The task force involved in designing the program for transforming Boston public-school spaces comprised an array of stakeholders from the local community. Collectively, these individuals represented city government, private foundations, landscape architects, teachers, naturalists, community and school activists, and leaders from private industry. This group set out a program for rebuilding Boston school yards based on four critical components:

1. the program should involve a partnership between school and community interests;

2. school yards should be multiuse facilities that include outdoor education considerations in their design;
3. upkeep and maintenance responsibilities for the school yards should be a joint community and city effort; and,
4. funding for the school yards should be based upon a public-private partnership model.

While the day-to-day functions of BSI have evolved over time, these four components have been continually used as the foundation for the initiative. The components have helped to support community involvement in the implementation of BSI planning and implementation of related activities.

Several organizational and implementation issues emerged as the task force sought to plan and implement the initiative. Some of the major issues can be described in the form of the following questions: Given that the City of Boston owned the school yards, who was responsible for planning improvements? Who would own the improvements? And who would be liable for any injuries that resulted? Would private foundations be willing to give money to the city to pay for planning and improvements? What could the city offer in return? While these questions could pose major challenges to the success and impact of BSI, the group was effective in getting people to buy into the idea that this was an important initiative that would benefit children, neighborhoods, and the city.

There were some fundamental differences regarding the style of decision making and implementation necessary to move the project forward. One key difference reflected contrasting attitudes about how to get things done. While the mayor seemed to have favored a community-driven approach, some staff were not as supportive of this kind of approach. Some in city government, for example, favored top-down planning and implementation with a strict adherence to budgets and schedules. This approach would involve closely monitoring budgets of community initiatives and some standardizing in the activities undertaken by community groups. They saw this approach as the most efficient and protective of public resources. Other stakeholders advocated a more flexible approach in order to encourage active participation from a variety of actors at the local level. This meant that decision making would devolve to a certain degree to neighborhoods and schools. It was proposed that, while less efficient than a more hierarchical approach, it would be effective in fostering a sense of ownership that would enhance the sustainability of BSI.

Reconciliation of these approaches emerged as a result of the private

and foundation funds that were part of BSI's budget. While expenditures for physical infrastructure were controlled by the city, BSI used private and foundation funding to hire the community organizers and BSI staff who would initiate and monitor new projects based on community input and participation. In effect, the city agreed to concede some control of the planning process in return for being able to rely on BSI staff to organize and manage the initial phases of a project. In addition, the city was relieved of the burden of encouraging and organizing local community groups and thereby has subsequently saved much staff time to work with local groups during evening and weekend sessions.

Consensus was also encouraged by the fact that city staff knew and trusted BSI staff; they were viewed as professional with expertise in planning as well as understanding capital budgets. Private foundations and community groups generally believe that the solicitation and involvement of community participation is fair and honest and thus are willing to support this arrangement. There is a sense that community groups do have an opportunity to influence city decision making regarding capital improvements to school yards.

The planning process for BSI reflected the support of the mayor and city staff, private partners, and community groups. They all saw BSI staff as professional, with expertise in appropriate areas, and committed to community participation. This led to some early successes in the implementation and development of school yards under BSI. In turn, these early successes served as a sort of glue in sustaining the coalition. They also reminded coalition partners about the terrible conditions of school yards and the effects of such on children and communities. The initiative's project planning begins with a release of a request for proposals that call for schools to apply for a planning grant. Schools must demonstrate a commitment from the principal and the ability of its staff, parents, and others to work together. Schools that receive planning grants hire a community organizer to facilitate the involvement of parents and other interested parties. They receive the services of a landscape architect to help them through the process of developing a shared vision for the school yard and a consensus about how the final project will be used. Actual construction working documents are produced by the city and its architect consultants.

The city is responsible for bidding the project and overseeing construction work. Staff from BSI are involved with the projects from the request-for-proposal stage through the end use. They facilitate meetings between design professionals and communities, help prioritize improvements when

budget realities force a reconsideration of the scope of a project, and have an educational specialist on staff to help schools develop new programming utilizing revitalized school yards. This is an intensive process that involves a significant commitment of person hours over time from individuals who are already overburdened with responsibilities. Yet the participatory nature of the process, the sense that they are contributing to a shared goal, keeps people involved. Funding for BSI, an independent, non-profit organization, comes predominately from private foundations. This private support, part of a long-term commitment from the philanthropic community to improve both the physical environment and the educational environment of Boston's poor, supports the organizing and educational mission of BSI. Funding for the physical improvements primarily involves public dollars with an overall ratio of three public dollars to each private dollar. But the private dollars help make the public funding more effectively targeted and have allowed the city to focus on the implementation of the physical-plant improvement program. The foundations involved with BSI have been working with neighborhood groups in Boston for decades. They trust the ability of local groups to design and implement projects and feel more comfortable with a community-based process than a top-down design process. They say they would not have become involved in the initiative and would not have committed millions of dollars to the project without this bottom-up approach.

Accomplishments of the Boston Schoolyard Initiative

In its ten years of existence, BSI has renovated about one-half of Boston's public school yards using about \$8 million of private and \$24 million of public funds. City funds came out of the overall city capital budget. Because this budget is relatively fixed, the school-yard improvements must have resulted in other projects not receiving funding. We could not identify any particular project or type of project left unfunded because of this shift in budget priorities. Similarly, it has not been possible to identify what alternatives were left unfunded because of the commitment of private foundation dollars.

The range of improvements varies at different sites. As suggested in figures 1 and 2, some of the changes can be visually dramatic. A school yard can go from looking empty, dilapidated, and unwelcoming to human interaction (figure 1) to inviting communication and interaction (figure 2). In general, all the projects contain areas for active play, including



Figure 1 School Site before Boston Schoolyard Initiative Renovation

hard and grass-covered surfaces and modern, safe, age-appropriate play equipment. Other areas contain a variety of spaces including gardens, outdoor amphitheatres, passive recreation areas, and plantings. Curiously, no interviewee recalled conflicts over programming in the school planning meetings. The conflicts that arose happened because a final program was deemed unaffordable by city staff tasked with pricing and bidding improvements. This would necessitate going back to the local committee. One participant noted, “Why didn’t they just tell us we were over budget at the beginning?”

It was not possible to measure if the renovated school yards have resulted in increased use, but anecdotal evidence suggests that they are indeed more likely to be used during school hours as well as during after-school times, weekends, and the summer. In addition, the physical transformation of the school yards is dramatic. There is no ambiguity, however, as to which schools have received renovations and which have not; a drive-by survey quickly confirms a school’s status. This is illustrated in the following before (figure 1) and after (figure 2) photos of a renovated school yard. Across the board, before and after visuals would show the same story.

Projects cost an average of about \$250,000 and are tailored to the physical constraints of a school yard, the projected uses of the school, the ages of students at that school, and the budgetary realities of the city. In recent



Figure 2 School Site after Boston Schoolyard Initiative Renovation

years, there has been a decline in city funding, forcing BSI to reduce the number of projects it funds and sometimes reducing their scope as well.

The Boston School Initiative has systematically upgraded a formerly degraded asset, creating recreational opportunities where none previously existed and turning dangerous surfaces into safe, usable, and used facilities. This project model has worked in a variety of educational settings (from elementary to high schools) and across very diverse communities that face a variety of economic, social, and environmental issues.

Key Challenges

A number of key challenges emerged as the design phase of BSI led to implementation and operation. Before explaining these challenges, it is important to keep Boston's demographic landscape in mind. Over the years, the racial and ethnic diversity of the school and city population has increased significantly, to the point at which the overwhelming majority of children in public schools is African American and Latino. Yet Boston is a city of distinct neighborhoods and with different demographic characteristics. These differences have sometimes fostered distrust and, at times, even open conflict. In the past decade, Boston has become a predominately nonwhite city with its African American, Hispanic, and Asian

populations now outnumbering its non-Hispanic white community. There has been extensive gentrification in central Boston neighborhoods, with new condominiums often selling for millions of dollars. Other neighborhoods, however, have experienced less robust economic opportunities. A large belt of lower-income communities surrounds the highly gentrified center (Medoff and Sklar 1994). Older white ethnic enclaves have survived both demographic and economic change, but they remain largely poor and working class (Brugge and Kole 2005). Some of the most distant city neighborhoods are made up of post–World War II housing and are mostly middle class.

Boston remains a segregated city with clear demarcations between different ethnic groups. This is a scar based on a history of segregation and racial strife (Levine and Harmon 1992; Gamm 1999). A challenge facing school-yard revitalization was sustaining a neighborhood-based program that could be perceived as race neutral. It was important for BSI to ensure that its projects reached every community and performed equally well across a municipality in order to overcome racial anxiety, mistrust, and divisive competition for resources across neighborhoods. Generally speaking, this was accomplished. Interestingly, civic cynicism arose as a big problem during the first years of implementation.

There was a sense in some places that the city was not serious about this initiative. School yards were so degraded for so many years that few people in the neighborhoods could recall a time when they were not in disrepair. There was a perception, or perhaps expectation, that participation in the planning process would not result in concrete and long-term improvements. Overcoming civic cynicism, an obstacle to civic participation, required visible projects that could be initiated and completed within a reasonable period of time. Much effort was expended to convince school administrators and teachers that community players and nonschool agencies could be supportive partners in enhancing the quality of schooling and the physical upkeep of school space. This was accomplished by planning processes that were localized at the school level and included assistance from community and city organizers, design consultants, and others with relevant expertise for improving school yards. Experts assisted each working group to develop a shared vision (incorporating ideas from inside and outside the schools) and realistic plans for improvements and using and maintaining the school yards after physical redevelopment.

Questions related to vision and the future of the school yards arose even within the framework of such streamlined and localized planning processes. Issues such as who spoke for the children or the neighborhood

were continually raised at the school-yard level. Other issues and questions included concerns about incentives for neighborhoods to participate in the planning effort. Would the wishes of community voices be respected in terms of design issues, for example? These kinds of questions touch upon the level of trust in localized settings, a dynamic that was just as key as particular programmatic issues raised throughout the planning process. It was very important that staff involved with BSI not discourage these kinds of trust issues from being debated or assume that they did not exist. While the infusion of trust issues does delay the planning process, in the long run it has proved to be significant to the success of BSI.

There is still some level of tension between city staff and school-based task forces. However, this might be a natural tension that takes place as a result of two levels of government and governance balanced in terms of management and decision making about projects. Reconciliation emerges as both levels understand that they can bring different resources to the initiative. For example, it would be logistically difficult and time consuming for city staff to attend all the evening meetings necessary to discuss and monitor local developments. At the same time, the task forces understand that projects have to be planned, designed, and implemented within a framework that is consistent with the city's budgetary restraints and priorities. Staff from BSI helped in bridging these sectors together by playing the role of mediators during many episodes. The fact that the mayor supported this initiative wholeheartedly also encouraged compromise. Heuristic and anecdotal evidence suggests that improved school yards are being heavily used by students and children from the community. For example, based on a few site visits at various times of the year, it seems that there is a dramatic contrast between BSI and non-BSI school yards. The contrast is based on how clean the sites appear and on the activity level at the school yards during after-school and summer hours. The presence of families at BSI sites also seems more prominent than at the non-BSI sites. There is, therefore, a general perception that the improved school yards have become a recreational resource. However, formal evidence for this perception is not available. Further, a formal evaluation and assessment of the initiative in terms of impact has yet to be conducted.

A question that has emerged concerns the relationship between BSI and learning. Staff for BSI feels that the use and impact of individual school yards are enhanced with the presence of teachers who participate in the development of school yards as an extension of the classroom. Clearly, however, some school yards are approached solely as recreational resources (very important resources, to be sure) but not as pedagogical

tools. There are some emerging initiatives on the part of BSI staff to encourage teachers to look at the possibility of the conceptual connection between recreation in a safe school yard and pedagogy. In fact, BSI has hired an outdoor-education specialist and has developed a grant program to fund new outdoor-education initiatives at the improved school-yard sites.

Another concern is the institutionalization of BSI and support for staff. As noted earlier, BSI staff plays a critical role in the success of the initiative and in bridging various sectors and interests on behalf of cleaner and safer school yards. One of the reasons that BSI staff has realized success is that it includes individuals who have a history of working in Boston's neighborhoods and are philosophically committed to participatory planning. Luckily, staff turnover has been limited and has thereby provided opportunities to learn by experience. If funding irregularities had caused staff turnover or the hiring of less experienced staff, the projects would have been less effective. This suggests the necessity of securing long-term funding for the private portion of the partnership. It also highlights the importance of mayoral commitment.

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative will falter if mayoral commitment wanes or funders decide to no longer support this effort. Thus, it is a critical time for BSI. The oldest projects are approaching the decade mark and have begun to show age. City janitorial staff do not have the skills or equipment to maintain outdoor spaces (for decades, most schools had no outdoor green spaces or vegetation), and staff has not been increased to meet the increased demand for maintenance. At first, BSI trained a group of maintenance staff on how to nurture plantings and maintain outdoor facilities and bought them equipment. But over the last several years, these individuals have left the employ of the city and have not been replaced because of ongoing budget constraints. One available option is to use the community and parent groups at each school to manage improvements. Although these groups have to commit to helping provide maintenance if they are to receive funding and participate in a BSI project, organize cleanup days, hold fund-raisers, and solicit donations, this is not institutionalization and perhaps not sustainable over long periods of time. So far, this system has worked at most schools, but all participants—city, BSI, private funders, school-based people, and communities—share a concern that the condition of the improvements is precarious.

Finally, and related to this last point, it is clear that parents are a critical component of BSI and its successes. Initiative staff and school personnel felt that the involvement of parents and the emphasis on community par-

ticipation helped to create more effective and welcome projects. However, parental involvement is uneven and fluctuates at various school-yard sites. Teachers and school staff have expressed skepticism about the level of parental participation that can be maintained over several years. In the neighborhoods served, many parents are financially stressed, need to work multiple jobs, or need to commute long distances in order to maintain employment. How parents can be supported to participate in this kind of initiative is a most critical question.

This potential problem can be exacerbated at school-yard sites at which school management is weak or at which teachers and staff experience high levels of turnover. If the school is isolated from the community—physically or otherwise—it becomes especially difficult to encourage and maintain parental participation. Both teachers and BSI staff proposed that the role of principals is significant to the success of school-yard sites. Principals oversee most day-to-day school operations and can make decisions that help to launch projects and activities and keep parents involved. Strong schools, in other words, are a piece of the success stories.

Conclusion

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative celebrated its first ten years of operation shortly after this research got underway, with no apparent signs of losing steam or exhausting its mission. Over this period, BSI has overseen the renovation of sixty-one school yards—a remarkable achievement in an era of smaller government and shrinking budgets. These concrete measures of success are made all the more impressive by the intangible and less quantifiable gains made along the way—including the strengthening or creation of bonds between schools, neighborhoods, private funders, community groups, and city government, as well as the contributions of the revitalized playgrounds to the physical and psychological well-being of children and to school and neighborhood vitality.

The accomplishments of BSI would appear to validate the public-private partnership model as a way of pursuing important community projects that might otherwise go unrealized, either because they were constrained financially or because they lack the profile or constituency to gain traction on the policy agenda. The public-private partnership also provides a suitable mechanism for directing resources to worthwhile projects while avoiding political skirmishes over siting and selection that can accompany traditional public works projects. The nongovernmental actors in the partnership help to instill a bottom-up approach to project develop-

ment that is counted upon to cultivate local ownership and sustainability. For its part, the involvement of city government, including representation of the mayor's office, has provided BSI with an unambiguous legitimacy and prominence among stakeholders. It is difficult to imagine that the success of BSI could be replicated elsewhere without the endorsement from leaders in city government and the funding and skills from a variety of nongovernmental actors.

At the level of the individual school project, the second critical feature of the BSI model is its reliance upon a bottom-up approach to planning, implementing, and maintaining school-yard projects. The bottom-up philosophy is reflected in some respects in the very earliest phase of the project, because the competitive bidding process involves some mobilization of school and community resources in order to prepare proposals for school-yard revitalization. The bottom-up approach then becomes more fully developed in the design phase, in which all constituencies meet to develop a shared vision for the prospective school yard. Ideally, the hope is that this participatory process will then foster a sense of ownership that will produce additional benefits, including greater local stewardship and maintenance of school yards.

A central feature of the initiative entailed the distribution of responsibilities to the multiple stakeholders involved in the project. School-based personnel (including parents and neighbors of individual schools) had to commit to participating in a planning process that often took a year or more, while private foundations and area environmental and educational activists had to agree to focus their expertise and resources on communities that were often on the periphery of reform and innovation. Thus, the call to participate was not based on appeals to civic responsibility. Instead, participation was directly linked to a specific benefit for parents and community residents. The City of Boston, legally charged with the fiscal and administrative oversight of these schools, had to cede control of the planning process to a nonpublic group and trust the ability of schools to come up with feasible and affordable redevelopment plans. While capital budgets were mostly derived from public funds (there were important contributions of private-sector funds from local and regional foundations), the basic scope of work for these projects was individually developed at each of the participating schools.

An important lesson that has emerged from this initiative is that the process of developing community support for local public schools and strengthening partnerships between these various sectors cannot be rushed

or shortchanged. This kind of initiative must be allowed to grow and develop as part of the planning process. Second, this kind of effort does involve some funding. It cannot be triggered or sustained simply on the basis of volunteerism or civic spirit. The funding is not huge, but it should be flexible in the sense that each school-yard partnership should decide how best to implement this kind of initiative. Ideally, this kind of funding should be foundation based and administered by an independent nonprofit. Foundations would not have participated without the community process agreed to at the beginning of the initiative. Ongoing maintenance is also very dependent on the community-based planning process.

In summary, BSI demonstrates that older schools in inner-city neighborhoods can be turned into community assets. The process works best when there is a chance to build trust and communication between partners. When these projects are allowed to grow, they have the potential to become important sites of play, education, and community development. There continue to be concerns about the long-term stability of BSI projects. Maintenance in the context of limited budgets is a worry, and the ability to use outdoor spaces when schools must focus on test results is limited. Finally, it is clear that successful projects depend on dedicated individuals both inside and outside the schools. Finding and nurturing these individuals remain a challenge.

This initiative shows that there are many kinds of benefits derived from neighborhood physical improvements if they are approached from the perspective that community input and participation is important. Fostering collaboration by sharing planning designs and visions for how space will be used and also providing mechanisms for qualitative decision making can produce significant benefits for children and their communities. If physical improvements had been centrally planned and implemented, it would not have been likely to produce the results reported here. According to the interviews conducted, benefits included more than just cleaner and safer school yards. The initiative also used this kind of urban space, where children play after school, to improve communication between parents and teachers and to generate interest on the part of community residents who typically would not have any contact with the public school. Teachers say that this program is often the only way they have contact with the residents around the school.

The lessons about the BSI model can be shared with other communities seeking to use school yards as venues for community participation with schools and neighborhood issues. Perhaps parks departments should

partner with schools to ensure that school yards are maximized in terms of utilization by children and community groups. Indeed, school yards can be venues where various interests congregate to advocate for greater public attention and funding. Foundations can help by supporting community organizers whose base of operations is in school yards. These kinds of activities will help to place public schools as integral institutions in low-income neighborhoods. The lessons learned from BSI also point to the philanthropic community becoming more involved in the improvement of school yards as a way to help strengthen neighborhoods and build bridges between public schools and communities.

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