

HEALTHY SCHOOLS
CAMPAIGN



SPACE TO GROW

A DECADE OF TRANSFORMING CHICAGO SCHOOLYARDS AND COMMUNITIES

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Community Advisory Council

Many thanks to Austin Coming Together, Brighton Park Neighborhood Council, Greater Auburn Gresham Development Corporation, Southwest Organizing Project, South Merrill Community Garden and Organic Oneness for their representation on the Space to Grow Community Advisory Council and contributing their expertise, perspectives and creativity to the future of Space to Grow.





MORE THAN A PLAYGROUND

ADVANCING HEALTH EQUITY & CLIMATE RESILIENCE



“Space to Grow is an investment in Chicago’s future—green infrastructure helps manage stormwater, reduce neighborhood flooding, and create healthier communities. The impact of Space to Grow goes beyond the schoolyard, providing long term environmental benefits while giving students a place to connect with nature in their neighborhood.”

ANGELA TOVAR

CHIEF SUSTAINABILITY OFFICER
CITY OF CHICAGO

ABOUT THE SPACE TO GROW FOUNDING PARTNERS

Healthy Schools Campaign

is a nonprofit organization dedicated to making schools healthier places where children can learn and thrive. This work is at the intersection of health, education, equity and sustainability, supporting health and learning in under-invested schools through on-the-ground work and advocacy at the local, state and national levels. Healthy Schools Campaign succeeds in these efforts by recognizing parents, caregivers and a diverse set of school stakeholders as leaders and advocates in school health, ensuring programs are rooted in community and designed to be equitable and reflective of the communities served. Healthy Schools Campaign manages the Space to Grow program.

Openlands

is a regional conservation nonprofit organization committed to protecting the natural and open spaces of northeastern Illinois and the surrounding region. By preserving parks, trails, trees and native habitats, Openlands helps ensure cleaner air and water, supports biodiversity and enhances quality of life for communities. With a vision of accessible green spaces for all, Openlands fosters a deep connection between people and nature, making cities more resilient and sustainable.

“Space to Grow ensures that schools and historically disinvested neighborhoods have access to these important infrastructure investments that improve the health and quality of life of students, staff and residents”

JENNIFER TANI

PRESIDENT + CEO

HEALTHY SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

By 2014, Chicago was making significant strides toward improving children’s access to outdoor play at school, building on hard-earned victories. Years of advocacy and organizing by parents and community leaders working with Healthy Schools Campaign had resulted in the reinstatement of daily recess, and a strong physical education program for Chicago Public Schools students. Children were finally back playing outside.

With the return of recess in schools, the focus shifted to play spaces. Faced with flooding issues, broken equipment and unforgiving and unsafe asphalt schoolyards, schools found that there were few safe environments available. How could they create beautiful outdoor areas for students to learn, play and grow?

This question planted the seed for what Space to Grow would become. At the time, Openlands was exploring new ways to connect people with nature in their daily lives. Healthy Schools Campaign and Openlands decided to partner, and together with three public agencies that make up the program’s capital funding partners: Chicago Department of Water Management, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago and Chicago Public Schools (and later the

Chicago Department of Environment), they set out to transform Chicago’s schoolyards into safe and shared climate-resilient spaces for outdoor learning and play.

What began as four pilot green schoolyards in 2014 has expanded to 36, serving over 36,000 students, families and community members. The program’s impact has gone beyond expectations: students are more active, teachers are more satisfied, the neighborhood enjoys more access to public green spaces, there is less localized flooding and school communities are fully and proudly utilizing their new spaces.

Space to Grow is an important element of Healthy Schools Campaign’s holistic approach to health equity, and works hand in hand with the organization’s other programs to improve school environments. Prioritizing schools in Chicago’s historically underinvested neighborhoods, Space to Grow invests in communities that are at high risk of experiencing the consequences of climate change like flooding and extreme heat. These renovations do more than mitigate environmental risks, they also encourage physical activity, connection to nature, outdoor learning and community engagement.

“As Co-founder of the Senate’s first ever Environmental Justice Caucus, I am so proud I was able to secure critical support that will assist in building climate resilience in underserved neighborhoods, and guiding younger generations into environmental stewardship. You are helping students and working families reclaim their schoolyards, green spaces and infrastructure. Thank you Healthy Schools Campaign for your leadership and passion as we continue to make Illinois’ young people feel heard, healthy and inspired.”

U.S. SENATOR TAMMY DUCKWORTH
OF ILLINOIS

“We’re always asking ourselves, what is the role of private philanthropy in the city of Chicago and where can we best direct our funding? Space to Grow was a great example of that because there were already capital partners with significant investments. This was a way to ensure that money was going to be used really well.”

ADAM ARENTS
PROGRAM OFFICER, IMC CHICAGO CHARITABLE FOUNDATION
AND A GENEROUS SUPPORTER OF SPACE TO GROW

At its core, Space to Grow is a collective effort between nonprofit and public agency partners to create equitable, green schoolyards that mitigate flooding and support Chicago’s public schools. Healthy Schools Campaign manages the partnership and, together with co-founder Openlands, leads the participatory design process, community engagement, and tailored school support. Capital partners—Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Department of Water Management, the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, and later the Chicago Department of Environment—provide funding, leadership, and technical expertise for the schoolyard renovations. This partnership offers a sustainable model for financing and supporting similar initiatives, showing how collaborative action can drive lasting change.

This report celebrates the achievements of Space to Grow over the past ten years and shares its model, inviting others to learn from and adapt these strategies in their own communities.





MILESTONES IN MOTION

THE SPACE TO GROW TIMELINE



“Space to Grow is the result of an incredible alignment of diverse yet complementary needs and priorities that led to an agreement for an initial pilot. Helping this bold idea develop into a program that has literally transformed Chicago’s landscape has been truly amazing.”

CLAIRE MARCY
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT
HEALTHY SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN



2011

Following Healthy Schools Campaign's successful parent and community-driven campaign, Chicago Public Schools mandates daily recess at elementary schools.

2013

Healthy Schools Campaign, Openlands, Chicago Public Schools, the Department of Water Management and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District collaborate to develop and launch the Space to Grow program. The program addresses key school, climate, health and environmental issues through schoolyard transformations, beginning with community engagement and design at four pilot schools.

2014

The first four Space to Grow schoolyards open at Grissom, Morrill, Schmid and Leland.



GRISSOM BEFORE



GRISSOM AFTER

2015

Healthy Schools Campaign hosts the National Green Schoolyards Summit in Chicago, convening leaders from across the country to scale the green schoolyards movement. The summit led to the launch of the Children & Nature Network's Green Schoolyards for Healthy Communities Initiative.

2016

Building on the success of the pilot phase of the program, Space to Grow capital partners commit to building 28 more schoolyards for the next phase of the program.

2017

Loyola University Chicago and the University of California's Nutrition Policy Institute assess the health and community impacts of schoolyard redesigns at Morrill, Grissom and Cather. They found increased outdoor space usage, more positive interactions between students, increased physical activity for some age groups, greater teacher satisfaction and stronger school-community relationships.



2018

Space to Grow receives the Healthy Community Award at the Chicago Neighborhood Development Awards.



2019

Healthy Schools Campaign, Openlands and the Chicago Mayor's Office launch citywide discussions on improving green stormwater infrastructure maintenance.



2020

Amidst COVID-19, five new schoolyards open and provide vital outdoor spaces for health and wellbeing, marking 25 Space to Grow schoolyards built.

2023

Space to Grow is recognized by the White House as an important cross-sector partnership as part of its Earth Day-focused Invest in Nature Summit.



2024

Capital partners commit additional funding for the next phase of Space to Grow, ensuring its continuation and growth in bringing more green schoolyards to Chicago students, families and communities.

Citywide discussions on GSI maintenance continue and the Interagency Maintenance Committee is launched bringing together multiple City of Chicago departments to enhance coordination, streamline efforts and ensure the long-term sustainability of public GSI assets.

The Space to Grow Community Advisory Council launches, bringing together community-based organizations to help guide the program's growth and ensure community-led priorities and equity remain at its core.

2025

Five new school communities participate in the community design process to help shape their new green schoolyards, set to open in the fall.



OUR BLUEPRINT FOR CHANGE

THE SPACE TO GROW MODEL

“Openlands is proud to be a founding partner of the nationally recognized Space to Grow program, which has transformed the lives of thousands of Chicago children by making nature accessible. Space to Grow serves as a model for people- and nature-centric design, guiding us toward more equitable, resilient urban spaces connected to the needs of both communities and the environment.”

MICHAEL DAVIDSON
PRESIDENT & CEO
OPENLANDS

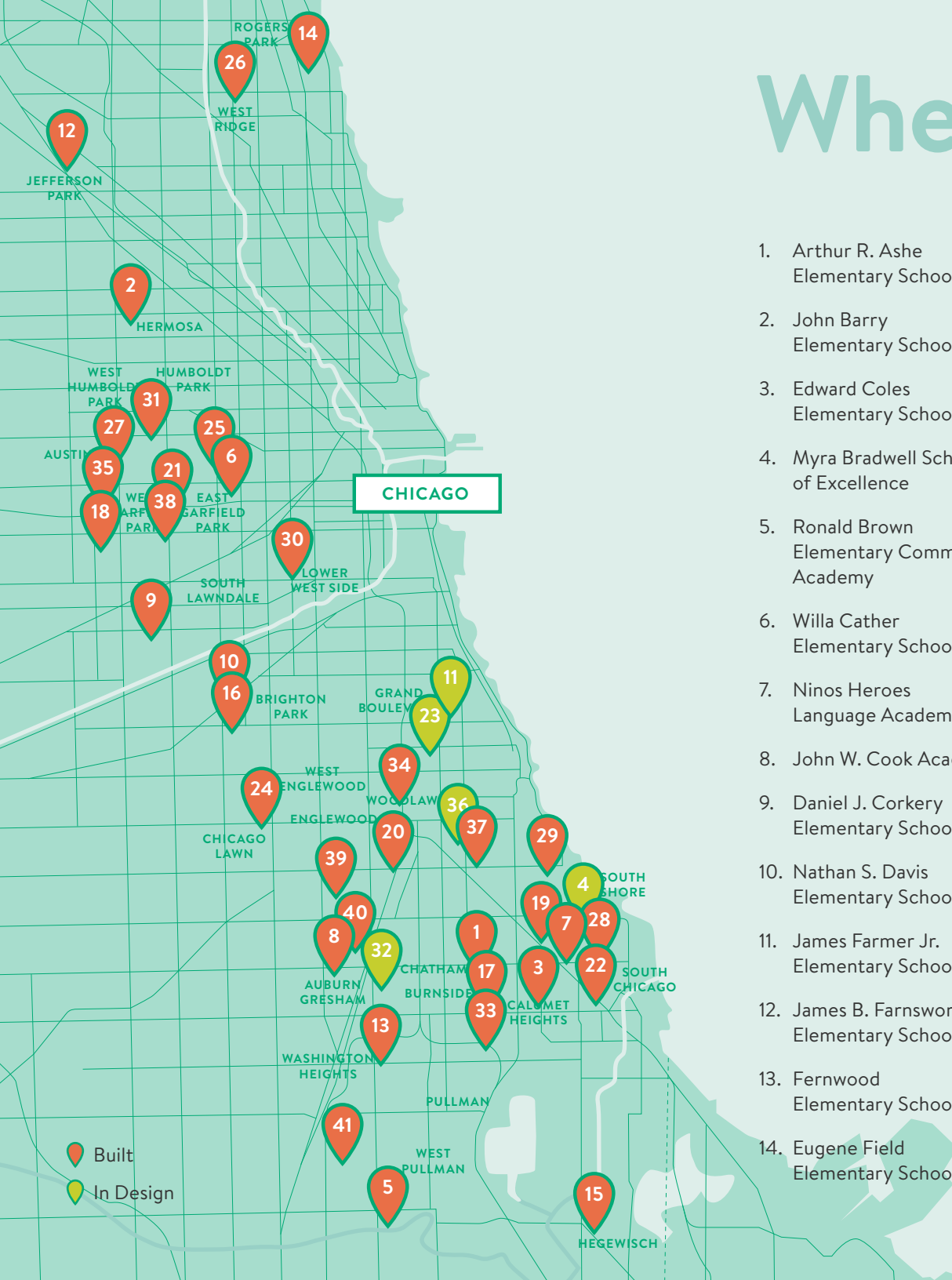


MIRELES BEFORE



MIRELES AFTER

Where we grow...



1. Arthur R. Ashe Elementary School
2. John Barry Elementary School
3. Edward Coles Elementary School
4. Myra Bradwell School of Excellence
5. Ronald Brown Elementary Community Academy
6. Willa Cather Elementary School
7. Ninos Heroes Language Academy
8. John W. Cook Academy
9. Daniel J. Corkery Elementary School
10. Nathan S. Davis Elementary School
11. James Farmer Jr. Elementary School
12. James B. Farnsworth Elementary School
13. Fernwood Elementary School
14. Eugene Field Elementary School
15. Virgil Grissom Elementary School
16. Frank W. Gunsaulus Scholastic Academy
17. Harold Washington Elementary School
18. George Leland Elementary School
19. Horace Mann Elementary School
20. Benjamin E. Mays Elementary Academy
21. Genevieve Melody STEM Elementary School
22. Arnold Mireles Academy
23. Irvin C. Mollison IB World Elementary School
24. Morrill Math & Science Specialty School
25. Morton School of Excellence
26. Mosaic School of Fine Arts
27. Henry H. Nash Elementary School of Fine & Performing Arts
28. Robert A. Black Elementary Academic Center
29. Isabelle C. O'Keeffe School of Excellence
30. Orozco Community Academy
31. Brian Piccolo School of Excellence
32. William H. Ryder Math & Science Specialty School
33. Theophilus Schmid Elementary School
34. Jesse Sherwood Elementary School
35. Spencer Technology Academy
36. Emmett Till Fine & Performing Arts School
37. James Wadsworth STEM Elementary School
38. Daniel Webster Elementary School
39. Daniel S. Wentworth Elementary School
40. Oliver S. Westcott Elementary School
41. John Whistler Elementary School

What we do...

1

**ADDRESS HEALTH
EQUITY FOR CHILDREN &
SCHOOL COMMUNITIES**

2

**BUILD CLIMATE RESILIENT
INFRASTRUCTURE, REDUCE FLOODING
AND INCREASE GREEN SPACE**

3

**INCREASE ACCESS TO
OUTDOOR LEARNING AND
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

1

ADDRESS HEALTH EQUITY FOR CHILDREN & SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

The ZIP code where you are born and live can have a major impact on your health. Due to historic disinvestment, racist policies including redlining, and other systemic factors, many schools and students in BIPOC communities experience health disparities directly linked to the built environment. This is why Space to Grow schoolyards are intentionally designed to support student and community health by expanding access to green spaces for outdoor learning, recreation and relaxation—encouraging physical activity, strengthening community connection and promoting well-being. After the schoolyards are built, Healthy Schools Campaign supports schools in establishing or strengthening school wellness teams and connecting these new spaces to their broader health and wellness goals. Openlands supports school garden programs, helping schools and communities experience the health benefits of spending time outdoors and engaging with nature.

2

BUILD CLIMATE RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE, REDUCE FLOODING AND INCREASE GREEN SPACE

With climate change driving more frequent and intense rainfall, flooding is a significant challenge for Chicago, especially due to its aging combined sewer system and the abundance of hardscape surfaces that fail to absorb rainfall. In response, schoolyards are carefully designed to mimic natural processes. They use green stormwater infrastructure to address water management issues, and enhance stormwater capture while increasing green space. These spaces not only reduce flooding but also provide environmental benefits like improved air quality, cooling and vital connections to nature for the community.

SPACE TO GROW KEY CLIMATE TERMS

Combined Sewer System

In older cities like Chicago, the sewer system carries both rainwater and wastewater in the same pipes. This type of system can become easily overwhelmed during heavy rainfall when the volume of water exceeds the system's capacity. This can lead to combined sewer overflows, where untreated sewage and stormwater are released into local waterways, including Lake Michigan, causing flooding and water pollution.

Green Stormwater Infrastructure (GSI)

GSI uses natural and nature-based processes to capture stormwater where it falls, reducing the strain on traditional sewer systems. Features like rain gardens, permeable surfaces and underground storage help absorb and filter stormwater, mitigating flooding and improving water quality. By mimicking natural water cycles, GSI also provides environmental benefits like cooling urban areas, enhancing air quality and creating habitat for local wildlife.

“We have a tree outside my classroom window that my students named ‘Steve’ during our tree study, inspired by the book “Our Tree Named Steve.” In the story, the tree is saved from demolition—just like ours was during the construction of our new Space to Grow schoolyard. I told the design team how we use the tree to observe seasonal changes, study flowers and fruit, and inspire writing. I said, ‘Whatever you do, the tree has to stay.’ And they made sure it did.”

TIFFANY WATKINS
TEACHER
WESTCOTT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



3

INCREASE ACCESS TO OUTDOOR LEARNING AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Outdoor learning offers numerous benefits for students, including stress reduction, enhanced gross motor development, improved focus and increased opportunities for inquiry-based learning. These new schoolyards serve as living classrooms, supporting teachers and school staff in extending learning opportunities beyond the school walls and enhancing education across all subjects through hands-on, outdoor experiences. Schoolyards are designed by and for the entire school community, encouraging local ownership and engagement with the space.

An illustration of a schoolyard during a rainstorm. In the foreground, a soccer ball sits on a green field. To the left, a person's legs in green pants and white sneakers are visible. To the right, a rain garden features various plants like tall grasses and daisies, with their roots extending into the soil. The background shows a light blue sky with white rain streaks. The ground is divided into layers: a green topsoil layer, a brown layer with dark brown spots representing gravel and rocks, and a bottom layer with large green semi-circular chambers. Text boxes with green borders provide information about each stage of the water capture process.

FROM FLOOD ZONE TO PLAY ZONE

Hidden Pathways of Stormwater Capture

WATER INFILTRATION

After it rains, water permeates through surfaces like permeable play surfaces, pavers and turf fields.

RAIN GARDENS

Rain gardens with perennial and native plants that have deep roots also capture and absorb water, helping to reduce flooding.

WATER TRAVEL

The infiltrated water moves through layers of gravel and rocks beneath the schoolyard.

CHAMBER SYSTEMS

Water enters chamber systems, which act like sponges to retain runoff.

SLOW RELEASE

These chambers gradually release water into the ground, reducing pressure on the sewer system and mitigating flooding.

How we do it...





“The authentic community design process is a major key in success, and I think that’s one of the things that’s really important because people get to see themselves in the development of their neighborhood.”

KENNETH VARNER

SENIOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MANAGER
HEALTHY SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

School Selection Process

The Space to Grow partners developed a school selection process to ensure investments are contributing to an equitable development of Chicago neighborhoods. Schoolyard transformations are prioritized in high flood risk areas, and assessed using the Chicago Public Schools Equity Index and a school’s need for playground renovations. Schools meeting the initial criteria are invited to apply to the program. Final selections are based on flood risk, the viability of redeveloping the schoolyard, socioeconomic factors, equitable access to green space and school readiness to partner and fully engage in a renovation.

Participatory Design

A cornerstone of the Space to Grow is the participatory design process; no one knows the needs of the community better than the people who live, learn, work and play there. The entire school community – students, school staff, parents, caregivers and community members all take part in the process and shape their future schoolyard. Through an iterative process, community members provide input, share their visions and help refine the designs at each stage. This ensures that the space reflects the hopes, dreams and needs of the people who will use it most.

TEACHING, GROWING AND BUILDING COMMUNITY AT GRISSOM

For Esperanza Baeza, the garden at Grissom Fine and Performing Arts Elementary School is more than just a plot of land—it's a place that sparks curiosity and discovery in children. As a teacher, the school's garden club lead and a key player on Grissom's application for Space to Grow, she has seen countless children dig their hands into the soil, marvel at tiny bugs and pollinators and eagerly watch caterpillars become butterflies.

Grissom was part of the pilot cohort for schoolyard renovations back in 2014. *"Even after all these years, I still find so much joy being in our schoolyard,"* Baeza says. *"I just watch the kids enjoying the space, and it brings me happiness to see them building community with each other, parents and neighbors."*

Baeza's enthusiasm is infectious, and her dedication to both the plants and students reflects the power of hands-on learning. As an Instructional Bilingual Teacher Assistant, Baeza knows education extends beyond the classroom. She takes pride in the garden as a space where students connect with nature, learn about stewardship and delight in the simple wonders around them—a wiggling worm, a blooming flower. Through her efforts, Baeza has cultivated more than just a garden; she has fostered a space where curiosity and learning can thrive for years to come.



COURTESY OF ESPERANZA BAEZA

Community Engagement & Activation

Once a schoolyard is complete, the spaces are activated through community and school events, workshops and educational programs that breathe life into the schoolyard. These events foster deeper community engagement and turn the schoolyards into vibrant hubs for learning, play and connection.

Among these programs are gardening and healthy cooking clubs organized by Healthy Schools Campaign's Parents United for Healthy Schools program. A partnership with Chicago Grows Food to distribute Grow Your Own Grocery kits at Space to Grow schools encourages children and families to plant and cultivate edible gardens in their classrooms and at home. Teachers frequently lead student gardening clubs, support sports teams and organize events that help foster a sense of belonging and bring people together in meaningful ways.

Healthy Schools Campaign and Openlands ensure that schools are equipped with the necessary resources for long-term success. This includes providing technical assistance and professional development for all teachers and staff, and organizing planting and stewardship days, where students and community members can take an active role in caring for their schoolyard.



ROTTERDAM DELEGATION VISITS WADSWORTH STEM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TO LEARN ABOUT SPACE TO GROW.

Funding

The capital partners fund schoolyard construction and provide leadership and expertise to help guide the program and identify schools for participation. Healthy Schools Campaign serves as the managing partner of Space to Grow's multi-sector coalition. Openlands and Healthy Schools Campaign, the program's co-founders, raise funds and receive generous support from a variety of philanthropic and corporate partners and governmental agencies. This support allows the partners to facilitate the community design process, provide long term school support and convene a city-wide effort to address the need for centralized and coordinated maintenance of public GSI in the city.

Education & Sharing the Mission

Space to Grow conducts schoolyard visits and tours to share best practices and encourage investment in climate-resilient infrastructure that enhances community health and wellness globally. Numerous organizations, including international delegations, public officials, higher education institutions, learning collaboratives and nonprofits focused on health, equity and climate, have learned from Space to Grow. Notable participants include the University of Chicago, Green Infrastructure Leadership Exchange, the Kresge Foundation's Climate Resilient & Equitable Water Systems initiative and delegations from Paris, France and Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

TRANSFORMATIVE SPACES

SCHOOLYARDS AS
CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE





“One of the things I loved most during my time leading the program was our unwavering commitment to the common sense notion that healthy students are better learners and that wellness should be integrated into every aspect of the school experience. It’s inspiring to see that this work continues, reinforcing that schools are more than just test scores and academics—they are places where students can truly thrive.”

MEG KELLY

FORMER SPACE TO GROW DIRECTOR
HEALTHY SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

Climate Impact

Chicago Public Schools is one of the largest landowners of impervious surfaces in the city. Space to Grow is changing this and contributing to a more climate resilient city, one schoolyard at a time.

Every time it rains in Chicago,
Space to Grow schoolyards can
collectively capture up to

7 MILLION

GALLONS OF WATER



That is the equivalent of

140,471

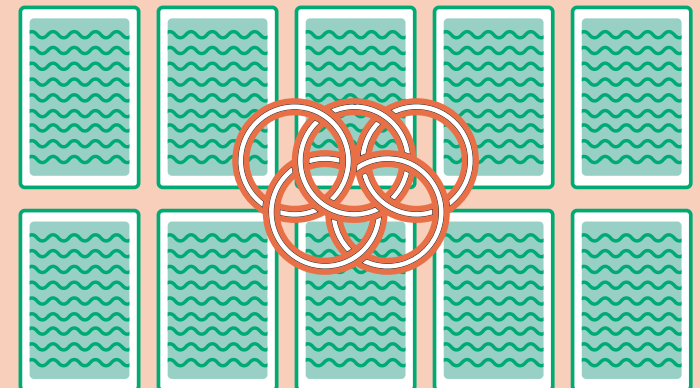
BATHTUBS



or over

TEN

OLYMPIC-SIZE POOLS



Across the city, the program
has transformed



1,469,400

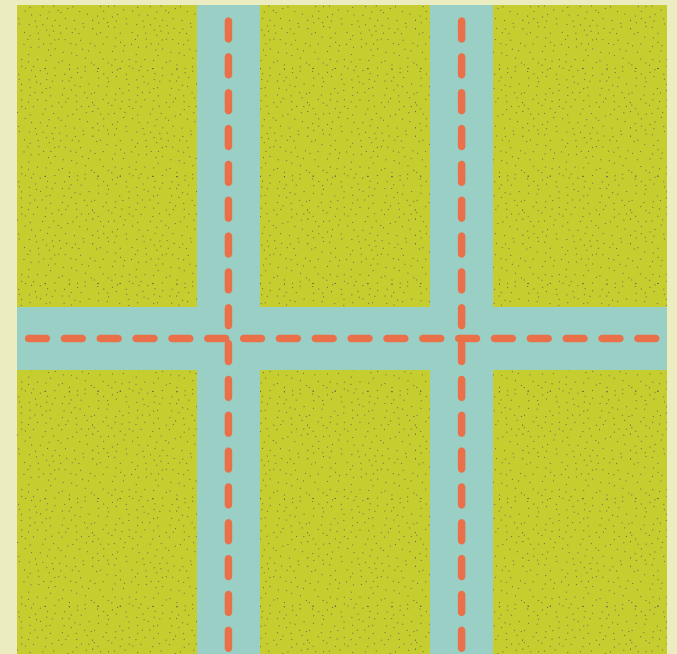
SQUARE FEET OF AREA

INTO MULTIFUNCTIONAL,
VIBRANT PARK & GREEN SPACE

That is the equivalent of

SIX

CITY BLOCKS



The program has added over

650,078

SQUARE FEET

OF PERMEABLE SURFACE*
TO THE CITY'S LAND AREA

That is the equivalent of

11

FOOTBALL FIELDS



*This figure includes only permeable surfaces in the stormwater retention design calculation, so the actual total is higher when considering additional landscaping and grass installed.

“Our native plantings are a constant reminder that nature is important, nature is all around us, that we get to grow things, and eat them and enjoy them together.”

FERNANDO KIM

FORMER PRINCIPAL OF GUNSAULUS SCHOLASTIC ACADEMY
CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

“A key learning from the program has been recognizing schoolyard maintenance as small-scale ecological restoration rather than regular landscaping. Partnering with Chicago Public Schools on this has been eye-opening, helping to improve maintenance approaches for long-term sustainability. It’s not perfect, but we’ve made meaningful progress in ensuring these spaces receive the care they need.”

DANIELLA PEREIRA

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER
OPENLANDS



School Community Impact

Schools report that Space to Grow has greatly enhanced opportunities for outdoor learning, inquiry-based education and social-emotional learning, while promoting both student and staff wellness. As a result, these revitalized spaces have become essential to school culture, fostering a sense of pride and ownership for students, staff and the broader community, and deepening the connections between education, health and the environment.

The Space to Grow partners work with Chicago Public Schools to inform best practices for the maintenance of green schoolyards. Significant progress has been made in working with contractors skilled in caring for native plantings, which require specialized knowledge and equipment for care. While there is a learning curve associated with stewarding these dynamic spaces, there is also tremendous potential for training and empowering crews to ensure their long-term success. Thanks to this partnership, Chicago Public Schools has employed specialized providers to support the ongoing care of native gardens and other GSI elements. This partnership not only addresses the specific needs of Space to Grow schoolyards, but also facilitates improvements district-wide. For example, innovations at Space to Grow sites, such as sand-based turf field infill replacing crumb rubber, are now the standard across the district.

A PRINCIPAL'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF COLES SCHOOLYARD

Let's take a stroll to Edward Coles Academy, nestled at the corner of Yates and 85th Street in the community of South Chicago. As you step through the gate, you're greeted by a vibrant schoolyard featuring a native plant garden, turf field, a track, play equipment, basketball courts and an outdoor classroom. This space is not only colorful and inviting but also helps reduce community flooding, with the capacity to infiltrate over 1 million gallons of water annually.

Charlie McSpadden, the principal at Coles, is a legacy principal—meaning he grew up in the community and attended Coles when he was young. Principal McSpadden has witnessed many changes over the years. Before the 2022 renovation, providing safe play spaces in the schoolyard seemed out of reach. He remembers: *"We used to have a great big giant space that was uneven that either had dirt and weeds growing or had broken asphalt and glass. There was always that fear that someone was going to get hurt out there... The little spaces that were outdoors, that the kids would have, would be flooded after it rained and so there was no adequate space to play."*

Now, the schoolyard is an integral part of the community. School celebrations, athletic events and community gatherings are all hosted on its grounds. Principal McSpadden notes that some of the elders who were around when he was growing up now lend a hand in the garden. "They get out there and they help weed it and everything... It is important to build that bridge because our kids, a lot of times, don't interact with seniors." Thanks to these changes, the schoolyard at Coles Elementary is now a place where students and community members can play, learn and grow together.



Strengthening
relationships between
school communities and
the natural world

36



SCHOOLYARDS

TRANSFORMED IN CHICAGO,
WITH FIVE MORE TO BE
OPENED IN 2025

10K+



STUDENTS

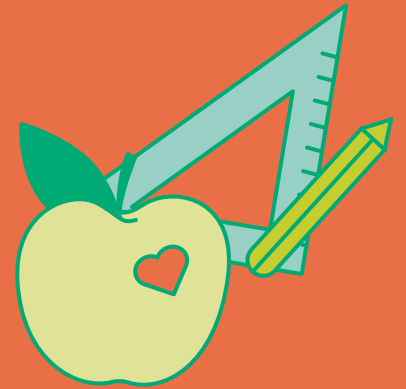
ENGAGED IN HANDS-ON, NATURE
BASED EDUCATION AND LESSONS

THOUSANDS

OF PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, COMMUNITY MEMBERS

INVOLVED IN SCHOOLYARD DESIGN & STEWARDSHIP

900+



TEACHERS

PROVIDED WITH KNOWLEDGE
AND RESOURCES TO INTEGRATE
SCHOOLYARDS INTO TEACHING

BUILDING BRIDGES

THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIPS





“The Space to Grow partnership has provided tremendous results in reducing urban flooding by absorbing and managing stormwater on-site, preventing it from overwhelming sewers while protecting businesses and homes from stormwater damage. The schoolyard’s benefits might not be easily recognized but with each schoolyard, we are improving the quality of life for the entire school community and the larger Chicago area.”

KARI K. STEELE
PRESIDENT
METROPOLITAN WATER RECLAMATION
DISTRICT OF GREATER CHICAGO



**Metropolitan Water
Reclamation District
of Greater Chicago**

“The Space to Grow program enhances the aesthetics of our schools and provides students with opportunities for both play and learning. This initiative also exposes students to gardening and emphasizes the vital role of green spaces within our communities.”

CHARLES MAYFIELD
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER
CHICAGO PUBLIC SCHOOLS



“The Chicago Department of Water Management has been proud to be a long time partner with Space to Grow in their work to educate the next generation about environmental stewardship. Space to Grow renovations are durable gifts not only to the schools that receive them, but also to the communities they serve by assisting with flooding mitigation. This program is an excellent example of best practice by offering innovative educational opportunities while diverting stormwater. We look forward to continuing to support Space to Grow moving forward.”

RANDY CONNER
COMMISSIONER
CHICAGO DEPARTMENT
OF WATER MANAGEMENT



“Space to Grow really shows the power of partnerships in addressing climate change. Each partner and collaborator brings their expertise, lived experience and creativity to invest in critical climate and social infrastructure for our schools and communities.”

EMILY ZHANG

SPACE TO GROW PROJECT MANAGER
HEALTHY SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

“Even though we (Openlands and Healthy Schools Campaign) represent two organizations, we are one team and we move as we are one team. There’s a lot of trust between us in terms of our intentions and values, our expertise and how we get work done that makes it easier to achieve our goals together.”

DANIELLE RUSSELL

GREEN SCHOOLYARDS PROGRAM MANAGER
OPENLANDS

Partnerships are the backbone of Space to Grow, and are essential for the incredible success of the program. Over the years, several important insights have emerged from Space to Grow’s unique multi-sector partnership. Creating a shared vision that takes into account and is explicit about the different priorities and self interests of individual partners ensures straightforward communication, alignment and long-term impact. Always putting school and community voices and priorities at the center of the work establishes a crucial Northstar that gets things back on track if there are disagreements. Establishing clear processes for program management, communication and decision-making builds trust and strengthens relationships. A commitment to ongoing learning and reflection fosters continuous improvement and accountability to both the community and partners. Finally, celebrating every success—big or small—not only acknowledges progress but also reinforces the shared vision and deepens collective commitment.

The strong collaboration between Space to Grow’s founding partners is key to its success, highlighting the critical connection between health, education and environment. The program’s broader partnership, which brings together expertise and capital funds from public agencies, demonstrates the power of collective investment in health and climate solutions. By aligning shared goals and fostering trust, partners are creating lasting impact at the intersection of health, educational equity and climate resilience.

VISION FOR THE FUTURE



“Space to Grow is one of the most innovative initiatives I’ve seen for improving school and community health. Its unique collaboration—bringing together Chicago Public Schools, government agencies, and nonprofits—has created dynamic outdoor spaces that enhance learning, wellness, and community resilience while addressing environmental challenges. It’s a model of partnership that I believe stands out nationally and sets a new standard for how we can come together to make a lasting difference.”

ROB ROGERS

PRESIDENT, SCHOOL HEALTH CORPORATION

CHAIR, HEALTHY SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Space to Grow emerged from grassroots efforts to enhance health, educational equity and climate resilience within Chicago Public Schools. Just as it was founded with community input and activism, its future will continue to be guided by the voices of the community.

Coinciding with the program’s 10-year anniversary, Space to Grow launched a community advisory council that includes key representatives from community-based organizations across Chicago. This council provides a platform for community leaders to inspire and scrutinize the program’s direction and ensure that it remains mission-focused on climate resilience through community-driven feedback, innovative design ideas and a commitment to health and wellness.

Space to Grow also sparked the establishment of the Green Stormwater Infrastructure Maintenance Working Group, a multi-agency initiative led by Healthy Schools Campaign, Openlands and the Chicago Department of Environment. The working group serves as a platform for peer-learning and collaboration, bringing together a diverse range of public and nonprofit organizations to explore ways to improve green stormwater infrastructure maintenance citywide. This working group meets regularly to share, build relationships and strategize on the key elements necessary for a centralized and coordinated approach to public green stormwater infrastructure maintenance in Chicago. This collaborative approach is advancing a practical vision for climate resilient infrastructure across the city.

The achievements of the past decade are a testament to the dedication of the entire Space to Grow constellation – the founding partners, capital funding partners, design and construction teams, school staff, students, parents and caregivers, community members and parent organizers who have tirelessly worked to bring about positive change. Space to Grow has developed a model that integrates community wellness with climate resilience in schools across the city, demonstrating how such projects can be successfully launched, funded and sustained over time. These lessons are pivotal for transforming Chicago’s landscape, shaping a brighter future and will guide Healthy Schools Campaign’s efforts in Space to Grow for years to come.

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