



# The Boston Schoolyard Initiative: A Study of Its Schoolyard Renovations

Disseminating lessons learned from a case study analysis of a successful active space redevelopment program

## SUMMARY

Researchers in the Boston University [Department of Environmental Health](#) conducted a case study of the [Boston Schoolyard Initiative](#), a project that provides funds and technical support to community groups dedicated to renovating schoolyards in Boston.

Researchers described the process by which the Boston Schoolyard Initiative came into being and identified its key successes, challenges and lessons.

## Key Findings

- The Boston Schoolyard Initiative's structure, which gives both public and private agencies authority to commit funds and make decisions, is critical to its success.
- Redevelopment efforts cannot be sustained by volunteerism alone.
- Schoolyards can bring schools and communities together.

This project was part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's (RWJF) [Active Living Research](#) program (for more information see [Program Results](#)). The program funds research that improves knowledge and policies regarding ways that environmental factors affect physical activity, particularly for children.

## Funding

RWJF supported the project with a *solicited* grant of \$29,653 between July 2005 and February 2007.

## THE PROBLEM

Since the 1970s, the prevalence of childhood obesity more than doubled for children aged 2 to 5 and 12 to 19 and more than tripled for children aged 6 to 11, according to a study published by the Institute of Medicine in 2005.

The Institute of Medicine study recommended that state and local governments "expand and promote opportunities for physical activity in the community through changes to ordinances, capital improvement programs and other planning practices." Research regarding childhood obesity strongly suggests that improving physical activities in schools must be part of a comprehensive strategy for improving child health.

Boston's public school system is the oldest in America and its infrastructure has suffered from periods of disinvestment and decline, according to researchers in the Boston University Department of Environmental Health. By the 1990s, almost all schoolyards were in an abysmal state. Some were used as parking lots and others were littered with glass and drug paraphernalia. They were disconnected from the communities surrounding them.

Many of Boston's densest and poorest neighborhoods had few recreational resources. Constructing new parks was unlikely given the cost of acquiring land and building new facilities. The abandoned schoolyards represented one of the few resources available for increasing physical activity in neighborhoods.

## **The Boston Schoolyard Initiative**

In 1994, a group of school and community activists and private funders proposed to Boston Mayor Thomas Menino that the city take a systematic approach to schoolyard redevelopment.

Mayor Menino supported the proposal and in 1995, with his leadership, the Boston Schoolyard Initiative incorporated as a public-private partnership. The initiative is dedicated to redeveloping schoolyards and transforming them into play spaces and learning environments.

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative sponsors groups comprised of parents, school personnel, city staff and residents in overseeing the design and construction of schoolyards. School principals apply to the initiative for planning funds and staff support for about one year. If the school is accepted, the initiative provides assistance from a community organizer, a landscape architect and a project manager.

## **CONTEXT**

RWJF has developed three integrated strategies to reverse the childhood obesity epidemic: evidence, action and advocacy.

### **Evidence**

Investments in building the evidence base will help ensure that the most promising efforts are replicated throughout the nation.

- The Foundation's major research efforts in this area—*Active Living Research*, *Healthy Eating Research* and *Bridging the Gap*—are contributing to the nation's collective knowledge about the changes to policies and to community and school environments that are most effective in increasing physical activity and improving nutrition for kids.

RWJF also seeks to evaluate innovative approaches under way in states, schools and communities across the country.

- For instance, RWJF supported an independent evaluation of efforts to implement [Arkansas Act 1220](#), which mandated a comprehensive approach to addressing childhood obesity in public schools.
- The Foundation also funded a separate initiative to analyze body mass index (BMI) data for all Arkansas public school students. Already, the BMI analysis has indicated that, in just three years, Arkansas has halted the progression of the epidemic in the state.

## Action

RWJF's action strategy for communities and schools focuses on engaging partners at the local level, building coalitions and promoting the most promising approaches.

RWJF is working with the Food Trust, a Philadelphia-based advocacy organization whose mission is to ensure that everyone has access to affordable, nutritious food. The Food Trust has been [bringing supermarkets back to underserved communities in Pennsylvania](#), and with RWJF is working together to replicate those results nationwide.

RWJF is also working closely with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation (a partnership of the American Heart Association and the William J. Clinton Foundation) to support its efforts to improve nutrition, physical activity and staff wellness in schools nationwide.

## Advocacy

As staff learns from the evidence and action strategies, RWJF shares results by educating leaders and investing in advocacy, building a broad national constituency for childhood obesity prevention.

RWJF supported the National Governors Association when Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee designated wellness in schools, homes, and workplaces as his Chairman's Initiative for 2005–2006.

Through the *Leadership for Healthy Communities* initiative, RWJF works closely with national organizations that represent elected and appointed officials—such as the National Conference of State Legislatures and the U.S. Conference of Mayors—to educate their members about successful approaches to increasing physical activity and

healthy eating among kids. The goal is to support leaders and decision-makers in their efforts to create healthier states, counties and cities.

## THE PROJECT

This project was part of RWJF's *Active Living Research* program (for more information see [Program Results](#)). The program funds research that improves knowledge and policies regarding ways that environmental factors affect physical activity, particularly for children.

Russell P. Lopez, ScD, MCRP, and colleagues in the Boston University Department of Environmental Health prepared a case study of the history and lessons of the Boston Schoolyard Initiative.

Between July 2005 and February 2007, researchers reviewed records, interviewed 16 key players and visited most renovated schoolyards. They documented the history of the schoolyard initiative and analyzed:

- The process by which school, community and funding organizations came together to plan and oversee schoolyard renovations.
- The initiative's major accomplishments and challenges.
- Lessons from the initiative.

## FINDINGS

Lopez reported the following findings from the case study in an article in the *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* and reported two lessons in an article published in 2007 in *Planning* (see [Bibliography](#)), as noted below:

- Soon after agreeing to launch the initiative, the mayor faced challenges in allocating money and authority across public and private sectors:
  - Different stakeholders advocated for different structures for making decisions.
    - Some city staff argued that top-down decision-making would be more efficient and better protect city funds.
    - Others in and outside of government believed a bottom-up process would foster ownership and enhance sustainability.
  - School staff and community groups were not certain about their roles or capacities.
    - Community members needed to believe they had the capacity to improve schoolyards.

- School personnel needed to understand that outsiders could be useful partners.
- Decision-making authority and responsibility were not always clear. It was not clear, for example, who would be liable for injuries during construction or who would sustain the schoolyards after they were renovated.
- There was uncertainty as to whether funds would be available and how to best allocate the mix of public and private funds.
- The mayor's decision to retain control in some areas and cede it in others resolved most concerns and enhanced commitment from a variety of important partners:
  - The city created the Boston Schoolyard Initiative as a separate entity. The initiative has authority to receive and spend funds, plan and monitor projects, engage community groups and mediate differences.
  - The city retains control of and pays for the physical renovations. Only school staff has authority to apply to the initiative.
  - Private funders believed that parents and community residents should have a strong voice, and when they were given that voice via the initiative, these funders became active participants.
- The Boston Schoolyard Initiative has had notable successes:
  - As of 2007, the initiative has renovated 61 schoolyards, or about half of all schoolyards, at a cost of about \$8 million in private funds and \$16 million in public funds.
  - People interviewed as part of the case study reported that there were no serious conflicts among school staff, parents or residents as they came together to plan their projects.
  - The initiative model works well in both elementary and high schools and in communities with different economic, social and environmental conditions.
- Notwithstanding these successes, the initiative continues to face challenges:
  - Boston is a city of neighborhoods, at times characterized by racial anxiety, mistrust and divisive competition for resources. To reduce anxieties that some neighborhoods were favored over others, staff had to ensure that projects performed well in a variety of neighborhoods.
  - In some neighborhoods, residents did not believe that the city was serious about fixing such degraded spaces. Overcoming this cynicism put pressure on the initiative to complete visible projects within a reasonable period of time.
  - There remain occasional tensions between city staff and local school-based task forces in making decisions. Initiative staff bridges these gaps by mediating differences and helping each group understand the other's point of view.

- Funds and community involvement required to maintain renovated schoolyards are not assured. While the city has been able to maintain schoolyards thus far, it is possible that budget downturns or changed priorities will affect its ability to do so in the future.
- The Boston Schoolyard Initiative provides lessons for others attempting to create public-private ventures:
  - Top officials must be committed to the project. If Boston's mayor had not been enthusiastic and supportive, the schoolyard initiative would not have succeeded.
  - Staff charged with bridging sectors and interests should have a history of working in neighborhoods and a commitment to participatory planning.
  - School principals are essential to the success of schoolyard renovations. Principals oversee day-to-day school operations and can make decisions that help launch projects and keep parents involved.
  - Redevelopment cannot be sustained on the basis of volunteerism alone. The planning effort should be supported by modest funds that can be allocated as specified by participants. (*Planning* article)
  - Schoolyards can bring schools and communities together. Renovated schools have become venues where residents, parents and school staff can work together to foster the well-being of children. (*Planning* article)

### **An Additional Requested Analysis**

At the end of the case study, the Boston Schoolyard Initiative staff asked Lopez to analyze whether students attending schools with renovated schoolyards performed better academically than students attending schools with unrenovated schoolyards.

Researchers examined student test scores on the [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System](#), the tests given to comply with requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Law. They reported the following in a 2008 research brief published by the University of Massachusetts (see the [Bibliography](#)):

- Some 25 percent more of students attending schools with renovated schoolyards passed fourth-grade math tests compared with students at schools with unrenovated schoolyards.
- There was no difference in English Language Arts test scores between students attending schools with renovated and unrenovated schoolyards.

### **LESSONS LEARNED**

1. **Do not attempt to conduct group interviews with school staff.** It proved infeasible to coordinate school employees' schedules so they could be interviewed as a group.

Researchers found that scheduling individual interviews worked well. (Project Director)

2. **Listen for and respond to ideas that emerge during the case study.** Researchers did not plan to examine student test scores, but did so in response to a request from Boston Schoolyard Initiative staff. This additional study yielded interesting findings and interest from a local foundation. (Project Director)

## **AFTERWARD**

The [Barr Foundation](#), a private foundation dedicated to improving the quality of life of Boston's residents and a long-time supporter of the Boston Schoolyard Initiative, asked Lopez to expand his study of student test scores to better understand how student test scores and schoolyard facilities are correlated. Lopez expects to begin that study in July 2008.

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**Prepared by: Mary Nakashian**

Reviewed by: Mary B. Geisz and Molly McKaughan

Program Officers: M. Katherine Kraft, Terry Bazzarre and C. Tracy Orleans

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