

Schoolyards for people in New York City

Even if your memories of grade school have faded, you can probably still picture the schoolyard. Large or small, asphalt or grass, it was your world and you knew every nook and cranny, from the quietest corner to whisper a secret to the straightest stretch to run a race. Nobody knows a playground like a child.

That's the idea behind our effort to tap students to help transform their recess areas into vibrant gathering spaces for the whole neighborhood. We began in New York City in the mid- '90's, a time when the Big Apple had less green space per per-

son than almost anywhere else in America. Looking to address the shortage, we spotted an underutilized resource: schoolyards. Back then—as now, in many communities—public school recess areas were barren asphalt lots, uninviting to students and closed to the rest of the community altogether. Taken as a whole, they represented an unprecedented opportunity to bring parks to the neighborhoods that needed them most.

The city embraced the idea. When Mayor Michael Bloomberg took office in 2001, he included schoolyards in his 30-year livability plan and named us as the city's nonprofit partner—in part, because we involve the students as our co-creators. While installing “cookie-cutter” parks might be faster, the city of New York recognized that incorporating the design process into school curriculum would motivate students, parents, and school administrators—and produce better playgrounds.

Over the last two plus decades, we've partnered on park design with more than 6,800 students to create more than 200 new schoolyard playgrounds across the five boroughs, putting a park within a 10-minute walk of more than four million New Yorkers. And we've expanded the effort, partnering with cities from Newark to Philadelphia to New Orleans to Oakland to achieve their sustainability and livability goals.

“This schoolyard demonstrates the value of student voices,” says Allison Cruz, a fifth grader at P.S. 213K in Brooklyn. “Watching our ideas take shape right outside the windows of our classroom has given us a huge sense of pride.”



Location: PS156 / LS392
Photo: Joe Martinez



Location: La Cima Charter School in Brooklyn, NY
Photo: Nomi Ellenson