



Free

to

Grow

The Case for Quality
Outdoor Spaces for All Youth

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About Us

About Urban Design Forum

Urban Design Forum connects and inspires New Yorkers to design, build and care for a better city. We are a member-powered organization of 1,000+ civic leaders committed to a more just future for our city. We believe the built environment—our neighborhoods, buildings, public spaces and infrastructure—shapes our city's health, culture and economy. We bring together New Yorkers of diverse backgrounds and experiences to learn, debate, and design a vibrant city for all.

About the Forefront Fellowship

Our Forefront Fellowship cultivates and equips emerging leaders in urban design, development, policy, and advocacy to create social change. Each year, an interdisciplinary cohort of Fellows investigates how design can address a social or political challenge facing New York City. Over ten months, Fellows explore wide-ranging approaches to the program topic in partnership with a city agency and through independent projects. Fellows build new skills and knowledge, expand their professional community, and develop meaningful projects with impact beyond the fellowship.

Our 2023-24 Fellowship, *Free To Grow*, reimagined New York City's public spaces where youth are free to be fully themselves, play and roam openly and safely, design and steward their spaces and live healthy, vibrant lives. The Fellows are committed to a future where youth are free to grow and learn at their schools, neighborhoods and across the city.



Fellows play Double Dutch with Double Dutch Dreamz. Credit: Urban Design Forum.

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The Case for Outdoor Spaces



Above: Street Lab's reading station at Union Square Park. Credit: Hester Street.
Next page: Edible Schoolyards garden at PS 216. Credit: Urban Design Forum.



for All Youth

Picture a school in your neighborhood.

Imagine the children, tweens, and teens in the schoolyard, with well-loved trees providing respite during a heat wave. On one end, children play loudly and freely, guided by playworkers trained in open-ended play. On the other end, a teen is reading quietly while a class of students takes their turn weeding in the garden. After school lets out, the yard hosts families and elders who spend time in the yard after pick up, choosing fresh produce from the weekly farm stand, playing a popular game with their neighbors, and taking a yoga class. At night, young adults hang out in the yard, moving furniture around to create their own safe space in the neighborhood.

Every New York City young person in every neighborhood deserves freedom—and spaces where they can:

- **Be:** Youth are safe and welcomed
- **Create:** Youth co-design their spaces
- **Learn:** Youth guide their own learning
- **Play:** Youth choose their own adventure
- **Grow:** Youth autonomy and agency are honored and respected

And young people deserve this **now**. Today's youth are surviving at the intersection of a series of crises: climate change; school shootings; crumbling infrastructure; the erosion of a public safety net; gentrification; the rising costs of essential needs like housing, food, and transportation; and the psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nationally and globally, cities are increasingly recognizing that reclaiming outdoor spaces offers opportunities for safe, climate-resilient, social, and engaging outdoor learning and play. Green spaces and restorative niches in school environments improve the mental health outcomes of adolescents. Young people of all ages benefit from outdoor play through greater physical activity and stronger self-regulation skills, independence, confidence, and resilience. Even more, spaces with a high degree of social connection—like outdoor school spaces—correlate strongly to improved academic performance. Young people value access to nature and the outdoors and want both stimulating and soothing experiences during and after their school day.

We know where to begin. New York City Public Schools serve more than one million students every year across 1,870 schools, 1,300 buildings, and 34 school districts. Yet New York City youth lack equitable access to safe, vibrant outdoor spaces at their schools.

Spaces for outdoor learning and play are not consistently available across all schools. Based on the most recent data from 2015, nearly one in every ten New York City public schools lacks a schoolyard or nearby park.¹ Schools with outdoor spaces are often filled with concrete or asphalt and are closed off to the community. Schools value outdoor spaces and make efforts to cultivate and use them for learning when they can.²

“If you don't live near a park, there isn't really anywhere to go.”

- Teen, [PowerPlay NYC](#)

Additionally, the quality of outdoor spaces varies widely, and our most vulnerable youth—students of color, students with disabilities, immigrant students, and others—often have the least access. Across the city, neighborhoods of color have 29% less park space than white neighborhoods, and low-income neighborhoods have 19% less park space than high-income neighborhoods.³

In the 2020-2021 school year, in response to the urgent need for students to safely return

to in-person school learning, New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) launched the Outdoor Learning Initiative. This program greatly simplified the process for schools to use schoolyards, streets, and parks as outdoor classrooms. Over 800 schools applied, and nearly 90% of applications were approved. The program prioritized traditional public schools in neighborhoods hardest hit by COVID-19 to address equity concerns with access to outdoor spaces.

This program illuminated the potential of outdoor spaces for learning and youth development. It was a success: the program increased schools' capacity for academic classes, supported social connections between students and staff, promoted physical health, improved



Credit: Street Lab

students' connection to nature, reduced stress levels, and led to unprecedented interagency collaboration between NYCPS, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), the New York City School Construction Authority (SCA), the Department of Transportation (DOT), the Department of City Planning (DCP), the Department of Parks and Recreation (Parks), the Fire Department (FDNY), Police Department (NYPD) and more.

However, after one year, the program ended. While schools can continue to apply for Open Streets through DOT and jointly operated playgrounds with Parks, the number of schools submitting applications and receiving approval has steeply declined since the end of the Outdoor Learning Initiative, partly due to a lengthy process that puts an undue burden on school leaders.

Our experience in the pandemic proves we can mobilize quickly to improve the lives and educational outcomes of our city's young people. All we need is the collective will to make this program permanent and citywide.

About This Report

In Fall 2023, 33 Forefront Fellows—community planners, educators, artists, designers and advocates—partnered with the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) and New York City Public Schools (NYCPS) to investigate the current challenges and opportunities in promoting youth health and well-being in New York City.

They engaged with over 40 stakeholders and subject matter experts; visited 16 school and community sites across The Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Queens; and led five interactive youth workshops with over 50 youth participants.

Their investigation offers insight into the current inequities in student access to outdoor learning and play, and provides actionable next steps for creating more spaces citywide. Our Calls to Action are organized into six sections, which discuss how outdoor spaces can advance (1) climate resiliency, (2) mental health and well-being, (3) physical health and well-being, (4) public and road safety, (5) social connection and belonging, and (6) youth agency and autonomy. This report also includes case studies that illustrate how outdoor spaces can support youth to thrive.

The report aims to educate, inspire, mobilize, and align city agencies to prioritize and expand high-quality, youth-centered outdoor spaces where young people can thrive. We hope city officials, school leaders and staff, public space and youth advocates, architects, designers and planners will use the Fellows' research and recommendations to better advocate for equitable access to outdoor learning and play, prioritizing communities and schools most in need.

Calls To



Action

Outdoor learning and play can provide many meaningful, measurable benefits.

We believe every public school in New York City should have a dedicated, quality outdoor learning and play space.

To realize this vision, we developed Calls to Action to address six interconnected priorities:

- Climate Resiliency
- Mental Health and Well-Being
- Physical Health and Well-Being
- Public and Road Safety
- Social Connection and Belonging
- Youth Agency and Autonomy

Each section includes case studies and recommendations on establishing vibrant outdoor learning and play spaces equitably across the city.

To achieve benefits across these priorities, the City should strengthen interagency coordination, deepen data collection and availability, and commit to youth-centered design processes. These calls lay the groundwork for the recommendations that follow:

1. Establish and fund an interagency, citywide **Outdoor Learning and Play Task Force**, stewarded by the Deputy Mayor of Strategic Initiatives, which should include NYCPD, SCA, DOHMH, DOT, DCP, Parks, FDNY, NYPD, NYC Department of Sanitation (DSNY), the Street Activity Permit Office (SAPO),

District School Wellness Councils, and Youth Committees from each district. This Task Force will allow agencies and school districts to coordinate projects, regulations, and permitting. To start, it should focus on coordinating street closures and park usage, simplifying permitting for community use of school grounds during out-of-school hours, and furthering research and evaluation for outdoor learning. The Task Force should also create an interagency funding pool for staffing, implementation, and maintenance, and identify additional funding opportunities at the city, state and federal levels.

2. Develop a publicly available **Outdoor Learning and Play Priority Area Map** that can direct investment in schools and communities with the most urgent needs. This map should pair qualitative data from walk-throughs of schools and communities with quantitative data from survey collection. The interagency Task Force should determine how often to complete assessments.
3. Prioritize **youth-centered, community-driven design processes** for schoolyards, playgrounds, and all spaces for young people. As described further in the following chapters, this approach ensures that local and youth knowledge and creativity are integral to the design of spaces, encouraging stakeholder ownership and making the projects more accessible and inclusive.⁴



Previous page: Credit: Mary Taylor, CC.

Above: Youth workshop with PowerPlay NYC. Credit: Urban Design Forum.

Climate Resiliency

A Climate-Resilient Future for All New York Youth

New York City faces serious risks from climate change that are rapidly increasing in severity.⁵ Our city is especially vulnerable to risks from increased precipitation, heat, and flooding driven by climate change. New York City ranks second in the United States for highest precipitation risk and 31st in highest heat risk.⁶

Public schools are particularly impacted by climate change. Based on most recent public data, over half of New York City public schools are located in neighborhoods that experience very high or severe risk of fatalities due to extreme heat.⁷ Over

one-third of New York City public schools are at risk of experiencing stormwater flooding⁸, with 16% of schools experiencing severe flood risks.⁹

Climate and environmental conditions impact young people's access to outdoor spaces. Extreme heat and flooding often prevent young people from accessing outdoor time in school. Our city can be a leader in climate resiliency by reenergizing existing environmental programs and creating new outdoor learning opportunities for young people.

New York City has significant momentum to address the challenges of the climate crisis. Since 2015, the City has committed \$4 billion in investment in climate

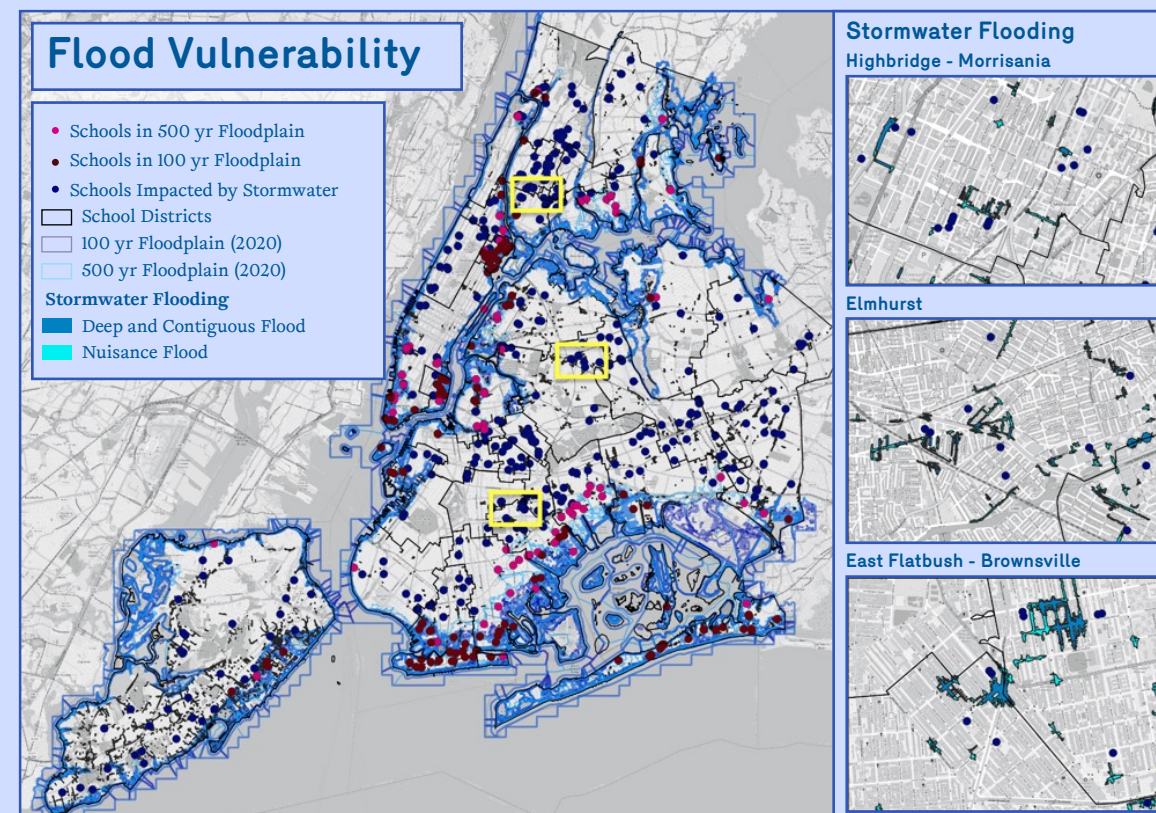
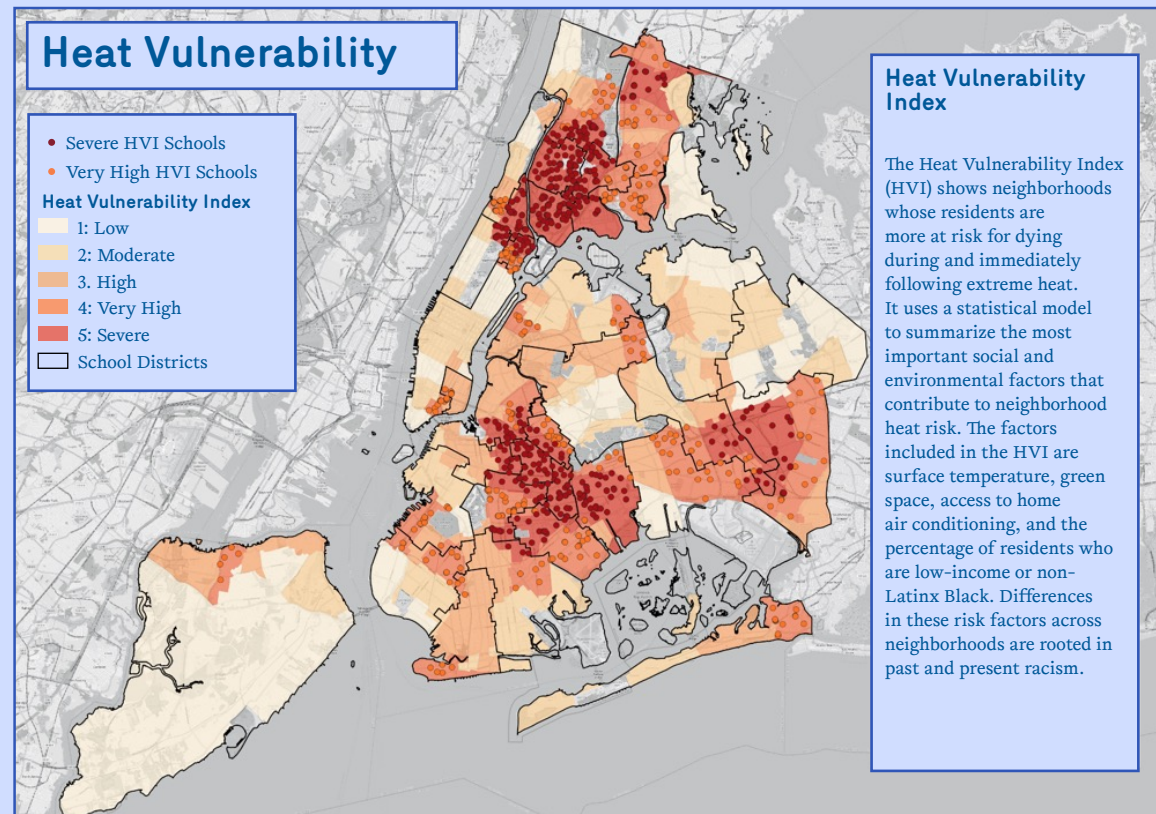


Children play at PS 24I STEM Institute of Manhattan. Credit: Urban Design Forum.

solutions.¹⁰ City agencies, community groups, schools, and residents are actively responding to the realities of climate change from large-scale flood-abatement park projects¹¹ to individual, school-based Green Teams of environmentally-conscious youth. The City has an extraordinary opportunity to invest in climate-resilient physical and social infrastructure, particularly at schools.

Young people will be more deeply impacted by climate change throughout their lives. NYCPS can create opportunities to engage young people in the design of resilient spaces that educate them about the environment, and in doing so, bolster

environmental education and green workforce pathways at public schools. This work cannot be the burden of young people alone—adults must use their power and agency to drive this work forward while incorporating youth in the process.



Top: Extreme Heat Vulnerability at New York City public schools. Data Source: NYC Open Data. Map: Rita Musello Kelliher.
 Above: Flood Vulnerability at New York City public schools. Data Source: NYC Open Data. Map: Rita Musello Kelliher.

○ Case Study #1

Nos Quedamos' Environmental Justice Youth Team Melrose, The Bronx



Rooftop garden at a Nos Quedamos building. credit: Urban Design Forum.

About

Nos Quedamos, a community development corporation committed to self-determination for the South Bronx, created the Environmental Justice Youth Team to develop youth leadership in the community. Each cohort of youth organizers (ages 18-25) develops their own goals for their work. In 2024, they are leading the activation of a rooftop garden in one of their residential buildings.

Origin

We Stay/Nos Quedamos was founded in 1992 as a community response to an urban renewal plan that would have displaced the people of Melrose and built unaffordable housing. The community drafted an alternative urban renewal plan that included 12 community gardens, Boricua College, home ownership, affordable housing, and multiple LEED-certified buildings. Their work today continues to combat environmental racism, displacement through gentrification, and any neighborhood development that threatens the ideals of the original community plan.

Impact

Youth build intergenerational relationships and trust in their community by organizing events to celebrate youth artists and activism in the South Bronx, supporting maintenance and stewardship of a rooftop community garden, and meeting tenants to organize visions for a healthy and climate-resilient future.

“We begin neighborhood meetings with combatting the feeling of hopelessness pervasive in the community. The antidote: gathering together.”

- Basil Alsubee, Project Manager at Nos Quedamos

Blake Hobbs Play-Za East Harlem, Manhattan



Blake Hobbs Play-Za. Credit: SCAPE.

- About** The Blake Hobbs Play-Za is the result of collaborations between youth and older adults to re-energize a decaying plaza into a beautiful, climate-resilient hub that the community is proud of.
- Origin** In 2015, SCAPE partnered with DREAM Charter School students and NYCHA senior housing residents to transform a 20,000 sq.ft. asphalt lot that had fallen into disrepair into an award-winning playground and plaza space.
- Impact** While preserving the existing tree canopy and activating the space with a variety of surface textures, recreational programs and plantings, this intergenerational space serves the whole community. Youth play in the Play-Za during the school day while maintaining access to NYCHA residents and other community members. Community volunteers offer diverse recreational programming for youth.

Calls To Action

1. NYCPS and SCA should incorporate the following **design considerations** into their design guidelines for outdoor learning and play spaces:
 - a. Natural trees and plants reduce erosion from falling rain,¹² filter the air, and provide shade.¹³ Native plants, which are low maintenance, increase biodiversity, provide shelter and food for wildlife and pollinators, and create place-based learning opportunities, should be prioritized.¹⁴
 - b. Light-colored permeable pavement reduces runoff by allowing water to drain into the ground¹⁵ and reduce heat capacity.¹⁶
 - c. Rain gardens and bioswales that are tolerant to flooding help filter out the pollutants in runoff.¹⁷
2. NYCPS and Parks, in partnership with nonprofit organizations, should **create an Urban Ecology curriculum** to encourage students to learn from New York City's natural environment. This curriculum should engage youth in the design of climate-resilient spaces, like their schoolyard or other play spaces. Students should learn how native plants, trees, rain gardens and bioswales, permeable pavement, and other design elements can be incorporated into their schoolyard or play space to mitigate the impacts of climate change. This curriculum could also advance the City's goals outlined in the Urban Forest Plan (Local Law 148 of 2023).¹⁸
3. NYCPS should **expand and support the implementation of Green Teams** across all public schools. Green Teams can steward climate-resilient improvements to outdoor spaces, improve environmental education curricula, foster student leadership in climate change, and bring a new generation into the green workforce. Although they are required as part of each school's annual Sustainability Plan, their implementation is not equitable across districts. To improve this, NYCPS should incentivize their districts to dedicate more staff and resources to Green Teams, especially those with lower rates of outdoor learning and play spaces.
4. The NYC Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) and Parks should **expand green workforce pathways** for youth, incorporating outdoor learning and play into their experience. Exposing youth to green jobs provides an enriching extracurricular experience and can connect them with long-term careers in the environmental sector. At the agency level, this can begin through DYCD's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). SYEP provides the funding for community-based organizations to organize students, support them in their neighborhoods, extend capacity and resources, and expose youth to future green careers.



Addressing Youth Mental Health Crises

The pandemic has compounded the mental health crisis among children and teenagers in the United States. When COVID-19 shut down school buildings and in-person learning, New York City's young people were severely impacted by a fracture in their in-person friendships and social connections, adapting to a digital-first learning environment, familial financial stressors, and trauma after experiencing the loss of caregivers, loved ones, and community.¹⁹ The shutdown severely limited already under-resourced communities' access to outdoor green and play spaces.

The stakes are high. Youth are attempting suicide at alarmingly high rates, especially girls, Black youth, and LGBTQIA2S+ youth, due to racism, sexism, and transphobia.²⁰ In a 2023 survey of New

York City teens, 24% said that they needed or wanted mental health care but could not access it.²¹ Integrating mental health services into schools can be an important part of the solution: youth are six times more likely to receive mental health care at schools compared to other community settings.²² Youth are calling on adults to address the youth mental health crisis at schools and community settings.

In addition to caring for youth, we must address the needs of the adults who dedicate their lives to their success and well-being. At the height of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021, teachers reported higher levels of anxiety than any other profession, including healthcare workers.²³ NYCPS teacher retention rates have declined since 2021, attributed to low salaries for a high cost of living, burnout, and poor mental health.²⁴

“Now, we’re in 2023, with one of the biggest mental health crises with our youth. And there’s been extensive research in the past few years about the role of independent and self-directed play on mental health.”

- Zoe Fortin, [playground:nyc](#)²⁵

Well-designed green spaces, playgrounds, and other spaces for youth can significantly impact overall health and wellness. Green spaces and connections to nature are highly effective in supporting young people's mental health and cognitive development.²⁶ At all five of our workshops with youth, participants described their ideal playgrounds as visually appealing, nature-filled, welcoming, nurturing spaces. For example, students at PS 241 STEM Institute of Manhattan in Harlem and the Police Athletic Academy's Wynn Center in Bedford-Stuyvesant desired tree canopies in their playgrounds, active playspaces, and quiet, restorative spaces.

“We used to crowd into the park across the street. The indoors of the school are pretty dull, so it’s a breath of fresh air and a much better school experience.”

- Student, [The Lab School](#)

Multisensorial design—which acknowledges that people experience and react to space in many ways—makes spaces accessible and safe for all. It provides more students opportunities to improve their learning through engagement and play,²⁷ which

is especially beneficial for students with developmental, mobility and neurodivergent differences.

Strong partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) and government agencies also broaden the reach of mental health initiatives. These partnerships use a holistic wellness approach, addressing the needs of youth and their wider community beyond school walls. For example, after-school programming like Open Streets connects dedicated volunteers to youth in their neighborhoods. The Childhood Bereavement Initiative organizes Death Cafes at [SNFL's Teen Center](#), one of our case studies. Our [PS 216 Schoolyard Case Study](#) highlights a partnership with Edible Schoolyards NYC that connects their students to the benefits of growing food and gardening, including parent Farm Stand days for families to enjoy nutritious, local produce.

Mental Health by Design (MHxD) Initiative Citywide



Credit: Wil540art, CC.

About The DOHMH Mental Health by Design (MHxD) initiative used Active Design principles to center the emotional wellness of students by improving physical spaces within their high schools.

Origin Recognizing the impact that built environments can have on healthy social-emotional development during adolescence, DOHMH launched Mental Health by Design (MHxD) in 2016, an innovative pilot project that awarded funding to 15 New York City public high schools, serving 10,000 students,²⁸ to support built environment projects that promote or improve student mental health.

Impact MHxD paired each school with \$10,000 worth of support, including an architectural consultant to guide project refinement, vendor selection and implementation. Select students from each school participated in a three-week course on the fundamentals of design, communications and storytelling for social impact led by Hyperakt Studio. Projects included six outdoor spaces and nine indoor spaces to help students relieve stress, practice mindfulness and access other wellness activities. Student-driven improvements to the physical environment of schools have had a positive impact on student and faculty emotional wellness.

“Young people deserve to learn and thrive on their own terms.”

- Kelli Peterman, DOHMH

Calls To Action

1. DOHMH should **explore systemic solutions to address teen loneliness**, including expanding access to outdoor learning and play spaces. DOHMH’s HealthyNYC plan, the City’s vision for improving life expectancy, aims to decrease suicide deaths by 10% by 2030.²⁹ Although the number of suicides among NYC teens is relatively low, from 2011 to 2021, the percentage of NYC public high schools who reported seriously considering suicide in the last 12 months increased, particularly among girls and students of color.³⁰ Funding and evaluating programs—like our case study on [Mental Health by Design](#)—to implement citywide is a meaningful step towards addressing student mental health outcomes.
2. NYCPS should **add outdoor learning and play into school evaluations** to measure their outcomes, particularly on mental health and well-being. Evaluating impact can help schools identify where additional support is needed from city agencies and community-based organizations, such as partnering with DOHMH to improve staff mental health outcomes.
3. NYCPS should **develop a citywide strategy to improve staff and parent wellness**, taking care of the people who take care of students. Educators need more support to be their best selves in the classroom, including greater pay and benefits, mental health services, and resources to implement programs like outdoor learning. Without investment into staff wellness, outdoor learning and play programs will only lead to greater staff burnout and stress. Likewise, NYCPS should invest in parent wellness will directly benefit students and communities.

Physical Health & Well-Being



Expanding Space for Physical Wellness

Schools play a critical role in promoting the health and safety of youth and establishing lifelong healthy behaviors.³¹ Physical health and well-being must include safe spaces to be physically active, as well as healthy food and nutrition, clean air, and more.

Physical activity has significant health benefits for hearts, bodies and minds, particularly for young people. It can help prevent and manage diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, cancer and diabetes, reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety, and enhance thinking, learning, and judgment skills.³²

However, New York City youth need more equitable access to safe spaces for physical activity before, during, and after school. While some schools have access to a jointly-operated park or playground (JOPs)—a collaboration between NYCPS and Parks—we found that many schools could not take advantage of the space due to capacity and time. Children of parents who report anxiety about neighborhood safety get less exercise, especially adolescent girls.³³ Additionally, girls participate in physical activity at much lower rates than boys and tend to leave after-school programs as they age.³⁴

New York State requires all public school students (grades K-12) to receive physical education (PE). NYCPS strongly



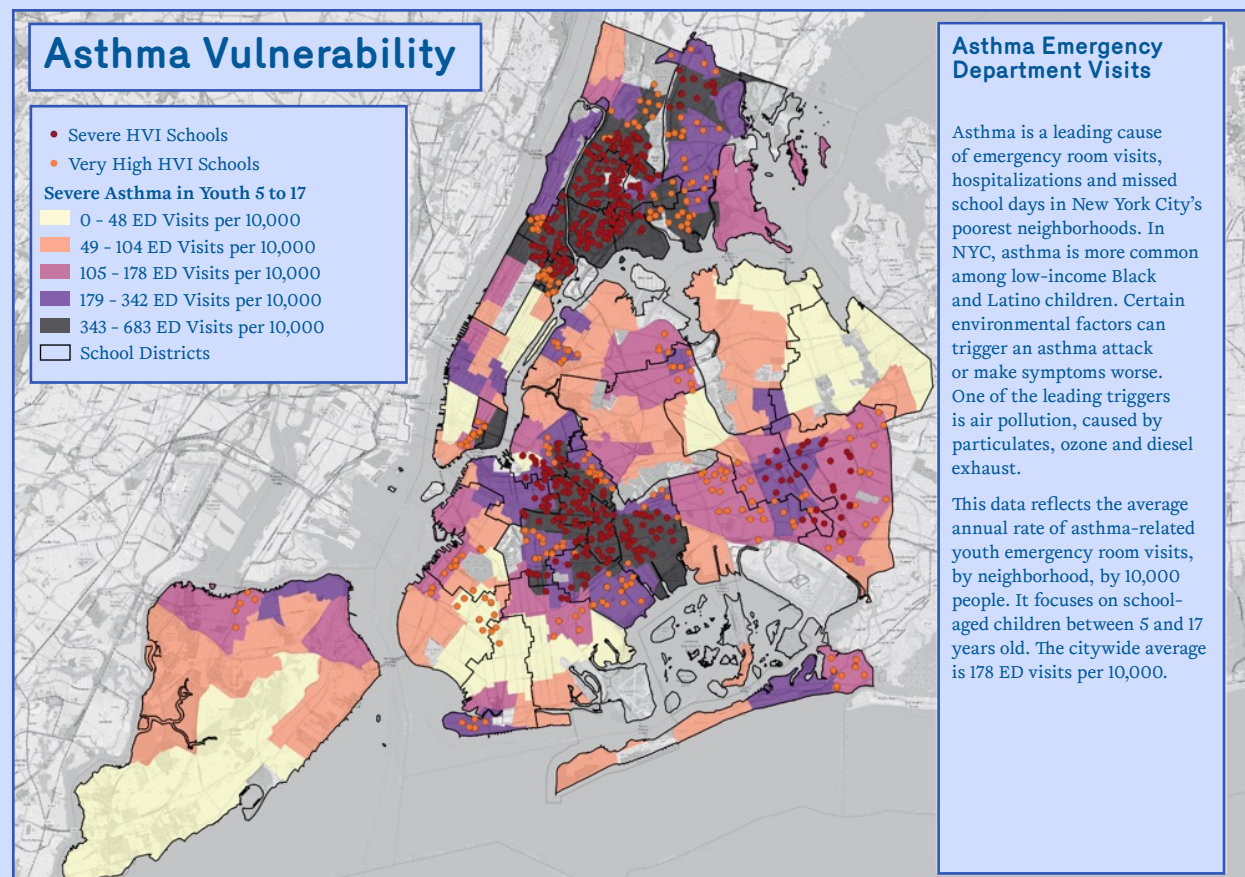
Fellows and teens play at Yolanda Garcia Park. Credit: Urban Design Forum.

recommends additional physical activity for students to complement PE, like short breaks during classroom time, recess, active transportation to/from school, and out-of-school time activities. Students need more space for physical activity to successfully meet state requirements and other city wellness policy recommendations.

Schools are foundational to nurturing healthy eating and overall wellness. In the 2021-2022 school year, NYCPS served nearly 150 million meals, including breakfast, lunch, supper, and snacks. For many students, school can be their best source of healthy food, associated with improved cognitive function, reduced absenteeism, improved mood,

and improved academic performance.³⁵ In 2023, NYCPS and the Mayor's Office of Food Policy (MOFP) released a roadmap Food Education Roadmap, which integrates food education across a student's experience in and out of school.³⁶

In New York City, asthma is more common among low-income Black and Latinx children.³⁷ Over half of NYC public schools are located in areas with high asthma rates.³⁸ Additionally, school air quality problems can lead to increased student absences, reduced academic performance, and reduced teacher and staff performance.³⁹ Climate change, particularly extreme heat, also increases asthma rates among youth.⁴⁰ Clean air



Asthma Vulnerability at New York City public schools. Data Source: NYC Open Data. Map: Rita Musello Kelliher.

is especially critical during childhood, and clean air in and outside of schools is an important part of creating a healthy learning environment and enabling students to enjoy outdoor learning and play spaces. Early exposure to air pollution can have lifelong effects on a child's life, such as stunted lung growth and brain development delay, asthma, psychological and behavioral problems, and anxiety and depression.⁴¹ Without

additional measures to address indoor and outdoor air quality for youth, physical activity and outdoor learning programs will fail students with asthma.

Case Study #4 Space to Grow Chicago, Illinois



Schoolyard before and after reconstruction. Credit: Space to Grow.

About

The [Space to Grow](#) program is a unique partnership that transforms asphalt schoolyards in historically underinvested communities into vibrant outdoor spaces. Schoolyards are designed with and by communities, increasing opportunities for improved physical health and well-being, including greater access to nature, gardening, nutrition education, outdoor play and more.

Origin

Co-founded by two nonprofit organizations, [Healthy Schools Campaign](#) and [Openlands](#), Space to Grow leverages investment from public agencies to transform schoolyards and provide rich community programming. Space to Grow's capital partners—Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Department of Water Management/Chicago Department of the Environment, and Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago—provide funding for the schoolyards. The team works together to facilitate an inclusive design process for schoolyards that engages students, parents, teachers and community members.

Impact

Space to Grow's evidence-based approaches to promoting healthy behaviors has increased student health, student time outdoors and readiness to learn. Educators report decreases in bullying as well as increases in community cohesion among staff, parents and youth as a result of shared schoolyard use. Teachers can incorporate schoolyard elements into their lesson plans on environmental education and climate resilience. In addition to providing access to nature and opportunities for physical activity, play, gardening and nutrition education, the Space to Grow schoolyards incorporate green stormwater infrastructure that bolster climate resilience and reduce chronic flooding issues.

"Schools are a community asset. Community input during the design process is crucial to the longevity of the schoolyards while also creating a sense of ownership."

- Kenneth Varner, Healthy Schools Campaign

P.S. 216 Schoolyard Gravesend, Brooklyn



Greenhouse and arts space at PS 216. Credit: Urban Design Forum.

About	Edible Schoolyard NYC (ESYNYC) partnered with PS 216, which serves 700 students who speak over 15 languages, to develop their largest garden and kitchen classroom space, a half-acre organic garden with over 160 different kinds of fruits, grains, herbs and vegetables. ⁴²
Origin	In 2010, ESYNYC's inaugural site at PS 216 transformed an underutilized school parking lot into a community asset, kitchen classroom, greenhouse and outdoor gardens. Support from Resolution A funding, private donors and foundations, and NYCPS made this project possible.
Impact	This site shows what is possible when robust programming and partnerships align. Youth participate in a culturally responsive curriculum, rooted in environmental justice, sustainability, nutrition and collaboration. ESYNYC staff, volunteers, and partners provide students with support and ensure youth have direct access to the garden on a weekly basis. Families are encouraged to participate in programming as well, including their farm stand days.
Data	Nearly 2 in 3 students said they always feel excited to go to ESYNYC classes, and 96% of NYCPS staff agreed that ESYNYC classes positively contributed to students' emotional well-being.

Calls To Action

1. New York State Department of Education should **mandate recess** at the state level and provide funding to support each school's play goals, plans, and implementation. There is no New York State or City requirement for recess or outdoor physical activity time. This year, California enacted an elementary school recess requirement, which defines recess as a free, unstructured time to play and socialize.⁴³ It sets a powerful precedent for considering similar measures in New York State to protect young children's right to play.
2. NYCPS should **expand its programming and funding for its Food Education Roadmap** for all NYCPS students. This tool can go a step further by partnering with successful programs like [Edible Schoolyards NYC](#) and [Teens for Food Justice](#) to improve access on a citywide scale.
3. NYCPS should partner with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) to **jointly use NYCHA's playgrounds and green spaces** as sites for outdoor learning and play for schools with limited to no access to schoolyards. There are over 2,000 public playgrounds in New York City and NYCHA maintains nearly 800 of them.⁴⁴ Schools can apply for a Parks permit to use NYCPS/Parks jointly-operated parks, but there is no clear pathway for schools to apply to use outdoor spaces on NYCHA campuses. We recommend a partnership between NYCPS and NYCHA to serve students at schools without schoolyards. Our [Smith Playgrounds Case Study](#) is a great example that could be implemented citywide.

Public & Road Safety

Reimagining Safety in New York City Public Schools

Youth deserve safety—before, during, after school and on their way to/from school.

Since New York City’s Vision Zero initiative to prevent traffic-related deaths and injuries began in 2014, over 100 children have been killed by a motor vehicle, and a third of those were killed while walking or biking were on their way to or from school.⁴⁵

In 2023, while 80% of students felt like school was a safe space overall, students felt less safe than in 2022 or 2021, particularly in spaces around their school.⁴⁶

NYCPS aims to create security at schools in

many ways, including metal detectors and scanners, gang prevention, school safety agents, and truancy programs.⁴⁷ However, school safety and security are public health issues beyond the absence of crime. We call for a holistic approach to safety, including safety on students’ routes to/from school. Safety must incorporate multi-system and multi-scale health interventions that address social inequities and injustices, are sensitive to local culture, and include the voices of all people, like youth.⁴⁸

In addition to safer routes to/from schools, safer schools also means providing safe physical spaces for youth in their schools and neighborhoods. These spaces should be vibrant, well-maintained, and foster shared trust and partnership between city agencies



Street at the Community Health Academy of the Heights, which has no outdoor space. Credit: Urban Design Forum.

and youth. For instance, the Mayor’s Action Plan for Neighborhood Safety (MAP) advocates for investing in vibrant public spaces—like streets, parks, and gardens—to build neighborhood safety.⁴⁹ This approach should extend to school spaces, both indoors and outdoors.

Improved access for youth to public spaces—including outdoor spaces and streets—can help repair community injuries and traumas, rebuild safety and trust, and provide a stable foundation for health.

Case Study #6

Stavros Niarchos Foundation Public Library (SNFL)'s Teen Center Midtown, Manhattan



Librarians at the Teen Center. Credit: Urban Design Forum

About The Teen Center at SNFL is a safe, inclusive space just for teens. Everything from the design of the physical elements to the expansive programs offered is centered on teen empowerment and engagement.

Origin SNFL is home to the flagship teen center in the New York Public Library (NYPL), serving hundreds of youth from all five boroughs every day. It builds on the long legacy of Margaret Scoggin, who created the first NYPL library dedicated to young adults in 1941. Since 2021, NYPL has opened 20 dedicated teen centers across the Bronx, Manhattan and Staten Island.

Impact Teens have a space to create trust among themselves, in an environment specifically tailored to them, with comfortable seating, tables and areas to just hang out and be themselves. While there is security in the building, the Teen Center relies primarily on conflict-resolution strategies to create an environment that prevents and de-escalates conflict. The media lab, recording studio, academic support and teen-led programming provide teens with ample opportunities to explore their interests.

“Youth need a place to be by themselves—a place that empowers and motivates them to learn on their own.”

- Ricci Yuhico, Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library

Case Study #7

P.S. 118 Open Street Park Slope, Brooklyn



Credit: NYC DOT

About The PS 118 Community School's Open Street seeks to create safer streets during arrival and dismissal by closing a street outside its building every school day from 7:30 to 4:30pm.

Origin This initiative started when parents and guardians started organizing for more street safety infrastructure in their neighborhood.⁵⁰ They collaborated with Open Plans, a street advocacy nonprofit, to realize a car-free street for school pick-up and drop-off, as well as future plans for more permanent street safety improvements.

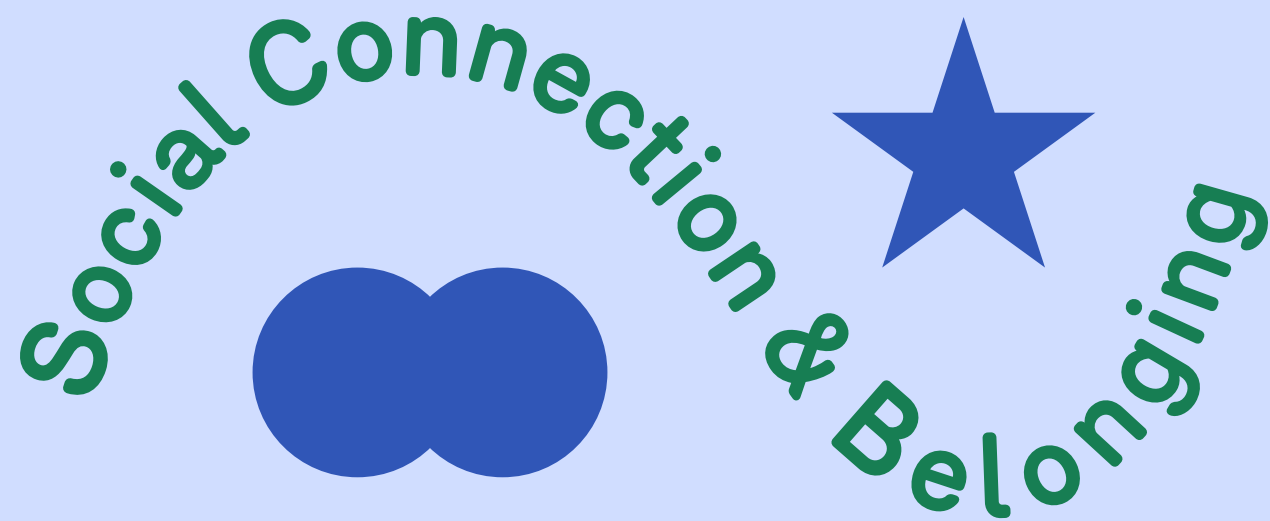
Impact With sufficient support and resources, like parent volunteers and the Open Plans' School Streets Toolkit, PS 118 created a safe space for students and the greater community to play, exercise and create art.

“Schools can turn the [School Streets] program into something as transformative and revolutionary and exciting and customizable as they'd like, from extra room for lunch and recess to a warm gathering space for parents to gossip with each other and teachers at pick-up, to outdoor classrooms to environmental justice hubs for the school community.”

- Sabina Sethi Unni, Open Plans⁵¹

1. DOT should **expand resourcing and funding for the School Streets** program. DOT's School Streets program (also known as Open Streets: Schools) enables schools, community-based organizations, and others to temporarily close a street to vehicles to support schools with drop-off, pick-up, recess, and outdoor learning.⁵² There is overwhelming support for the program,⁵³ and nearly half of NYC schools applied to host an Open Street in 2020.⁵⁴ By expanding the School Streets program, many more schools across the city can make their school streets safer to breathe and exercise outdoors, more fun, and more youth-centered.⁵⁵
2. DOT and NYCPS should **promote healthy and climate-friendly options** for students' routes to and from school that enhance students' physical well-being, reduce congestion around schools which improves air quality, ensure safer pickup and drop-off, and contribute to overall street safety. For example, [NYC Bike Bus](#) advocates for safe, healthy bike routes and encourages youth, families, and neighborhood residents to bike together to school.⁵⁶
3. DOT and NYCPS should **install clear, easy-to-read wayfinding signage** on surrounding neighborhood streets, highlighting school locations, neighborhood resources and services, and community landmarks, to increase neighborhood visibility and safety. This signage must be inclusive, using materials and displaying information that allows for students with physical disabilities (like students with no- to low-vision), neurodivergence, and developmental and intellectual disabilities to navigate their schools and neighborhoods with ease.
4. The Mayor should **allocate more funding** to its Vision Zero initiative. More funding will allow interagency collaboration to quickly and effectively implement school safety measures that reduce traffic-related incidents and fatalities and bolster education programs that promote safe transportation.

5. NYPD should **redesign metal barriers** used for street closures, including those used for School Streets. To improve their visibility to drivers, as well as create a more inviting environment for children and pedestrians, we recommend developing a street closure barrier that is taller, easy to maneuver, and incorporates public art from the local community.
6. NYCPS should **bolster its School Safety Committee** initiative. Currently, at the beginning of each school year, all schools are required to create a School Safety Plan co-developed by a School Safety Committee. At this time, the School Safety Committees are not required to address student safety concerns to/from school. We recommend that this committee add safe routes to/from school as a priority area. In addition, the committee should include a community member representative (such as a parent, business owner, or other community member) to imagine holistic approaches to school safety.



Fostering Greater Connection and Belonging in Schools and Neighborhoods

It takes a village to nurture our youth, so they experience deep care, connection and belonging. Their village, or care community, is often composed of their families and caregivers as well as friends and peers, educators, mentors, faith leaders, coaches and other trusted adults. We envision schools as critical to these care communities, and outdoor spaces at and around schools as important sites for care in action.

There are few safe, free, accessible, and welcoming social spaces for youth. At schools nationwide, middle and high school students are struggling to feel a sense of belonging at school. 49% of high school students say they feel like they are part of their school community.⁵⁷ In New York City, nearly half of middle school students have witnessed or experienced harassment, bullying or intimidation. A third of students lacked trusting relationships with other students.⁵⁸ Outside of schools, youth in our workshops shared their experiences of feeling watched by police and other adults in public spaces, so they spend much of their free time indoors at home.

Outdoor spaces for youth can foster social connection, belonging, and overall well-being by creating new opportunities to socialize with friends, peers, and neighbors. Research also shows a strong correlation between a high degree of social connection and improved academic performance in a school environment.⁵⁹ Investing in outdoor learning and play spaces not only addresses the immediate social challenges faced by young people but also holds promise for enhancing their academic outcomes.

Outdoor learning and play—and the process of reclaiming of outdoor spaces for youth—can also address the shortage of social spaces within communities. Outdoor learning and play spaces can often be visible to the surrounding community, and they place students in an environment

where they can engage with the world outside the school's walls. As such, outdoor learning and play present unique opportunities for a school to be more deeply rooted in the neighborhood and community in which it is located. Students can use outdoor spaces to connect to a community beyond their school. School spaces belong to the community, too, which supports residents in designing and maintaining them.

Is Your Space Fostering Connection?

When developing a program, policy, initiative, or space that promotes social connection and belonging, consider the following questions:

- Does our program, policy, or space recognize and appreciate diverse cultural nuances, ensuring inclusivity and respect for different cultural identities?
- Does our program, policy, or space acknowledge the non-monolithic nature of identities, promoting a more multifaceted understanding of individuality and fostering an environment that respects diverse identity expressions?
- How can our program, policy, or space adopt individualized approaches to cater to the varied needs and experiences of individuals, ensuring inclusivity on a personal level?

Case Study #8

34th Avenue Open Street Jackson Heights, Queens



Credit: 34th Avenue Open Street Coalition.

About The [34th Avenue Open Street](#), an initiative of the 34th Avenue Open Street Coalition that is supported through the DOT’s Open Streets program, is a fixture of the neighborhood that fosters intergenerational outdoor learning, play, and programming for residents. It runs every day of the week along a mile-long stretch along 34th Avenue in Queens.

Origin Co-founded by Jim Burke in 2020, 34th Avenue Open Street Coalition is rooted in the lived experience of COVID-19 New York. New Yorkers saw an increased need for outdoor spaces, particularly in neighborhoods like Jackson Heights with little social infrastructure accessible to youth. Burke was inspired by his upbringing on the Grand Concourse in the 1970s where kids in his neighborhood “ruled the streets.”

Impact Although initially intended for youth, this Open Street has become a flourishing third space – bridging people across age, class, race, religion, and immigration status. By actively involving youth in programming, the Open Street fosters safe social spaces for students across six different schools along the street. Young people participate in multigenerational and multilingual programming, like dance classes, yoga, crafts, family bike rides and more. In just two years, the Open Street has hosted 500 events and continues to grow.

Case Study #9

Youth Design Center Brownsville, Brooklyn



Youth showing photos from a neighborhood tour. Credit: Urban Design Forum

About Serving as a youth-focused creative agency and innovation hub, the [Youth Design Center](#) (YDC) provides a gateway for young people to learn marketable skills, further their education and achieve economic mobility.

Origin YDC’s founder Quardean Lewis-Allen noticed the lack of diversity after entering the design/architecture field. He wanted to create more opportunities, break barriers, and design accessible pathways for Black and Brown youth to get their start in STEAM careers.

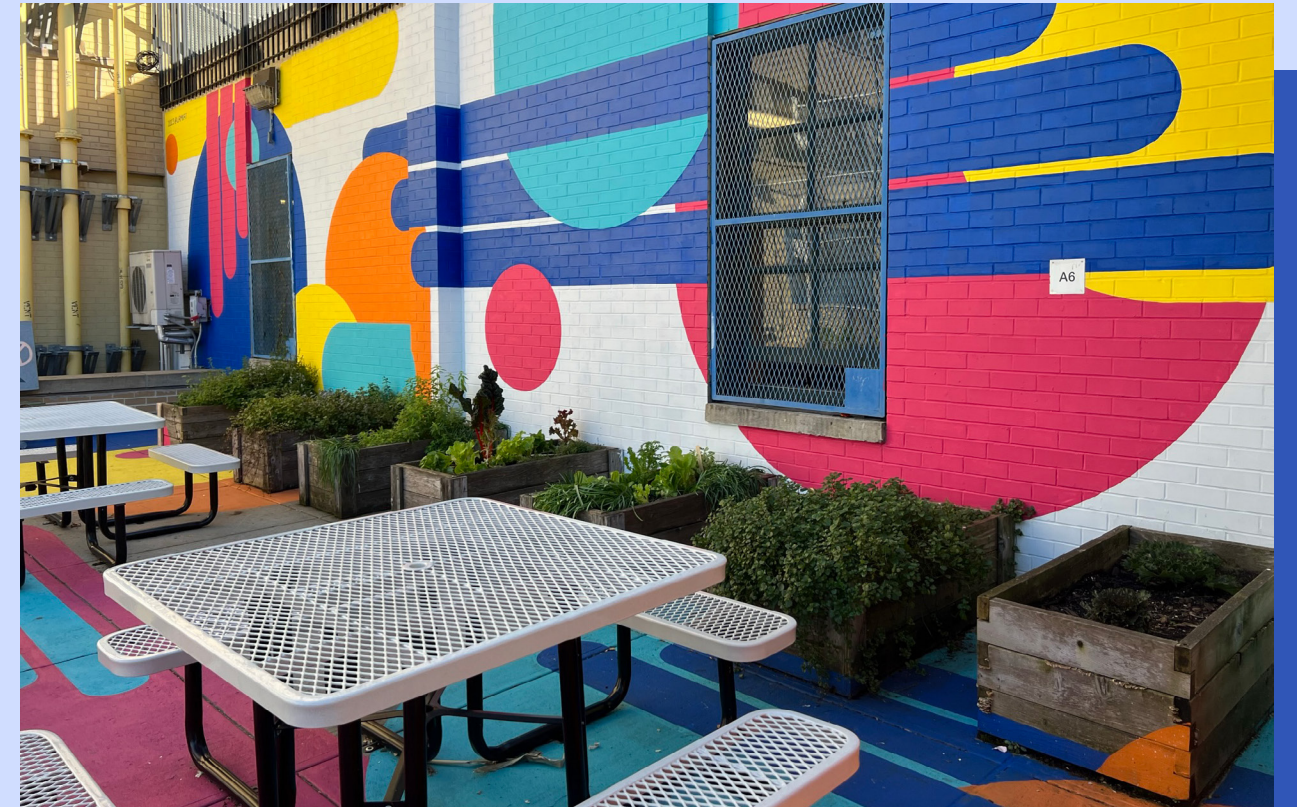
Impact Youth develop as leaders and designers through genuine relationships between students and staff. Youth across the city come to YDC to build their design expertise and also contribute meaningfully to the neighborhood community. Although YDC doesn’t have a dedicated outdoor learning space, we see how their program uniquely strengthens youth social connection and belonging to the immediate community of Brownsville.

“Youth Design Center is a youth-led organization. We believe in putting youth first because we know they have a voice and a vision, and will be our next future leaders and innovators. Our mission is to ensure that we make it easier for them to get to whatever destination they see themselves. We are excited for more opportunities to give youth the platform to be cultivators for their community.”

- Quardean Lewis-Allen

Calls To Action

1. NYCPS should **develop a strategic plan for social connection and belonging** in outdoor learning spaces, providing guidance on evidence-based practices, implementation plans for peer- and community-led programs, infrastructural investments required, and more.
2. NYCPS should **gather more data on social connection and belonging** at schools, co-defined with students, teachers, and other school groups. See [Appendix: Social Connection & Belonging Questionnaire](#) for a sample questionnaire we developed to support data collection.
3. NYCPS should reinstate their relationship with the **National Safe Place Network**, where community spaces like local businesses, community gardens, and other neighborhood spaces can serve as safe spaces for youth in crisis.
4. NYCPS should **pilot and fund a “Playful Neighborhoods” initiative**. Starting with a small group of nearby schools for a one-month pilot, schools can apply for funding to develop neighborhood-wide social connection and belonging programs for youth and the community at-large that create stronger ties between school-based outdoor learning and play spaces and neighborhood play spaces.
5. NYC Parks should **pilot a “Multigenerational Playgrounds” initiative** in intergenerational neighborhoods, modeled after multigenerational fitness parks,⁶⁰ that include play structures and fitness equipment that are safe for children and adults alike.



Restorative space at PS/MS 206 José Celso Barbosa. Credit: Urban Design Forum.

Youth Autonomy & Agency

Open, Free Play as Youth Agency in Action

Outdoor, open-ended, free play provides a vital setting for unstructured and youth-led learning. When youth are free to explore independently,⁶¹ they build their autonomy, social-emotional learning and development. Open play allows youth to test different risks and tackle new challenges. Outdoor learning and play that encourages youth to take risks and make mistakes benefits young people with greater physical activity, stronger self-regulation skills, and encourages their independence, confidence, and resiliency. Adults can best serve youth by acting as playworkers—or advocates that support the play process—balancing risk with the development benefits.⁶²

“Children have a sense of freedom outside.”

- Staff Member, Community Health Academy of the Heights

However, in the U.S. and globally, young people’s opportunities for outdoor free play and their geographic range of movement have been declining, with immediate ramifications for youth’s health and well-being.⁶³ Most of New York City’s existing parks and playgrounds are not equipped to facilitate the dynamic and challenging play that older children, adolescents, and teens need. Common playground structures like slides, swings, and monkey bars are meant to facilitate the development of gross motor skills like walking, climbing, and jumping. These skills are typically mastered by the age of six or seven, leading adolescents and teenagers to underutilize these existing play spaces. Other forms of play, like adventure-based play, encourage teens to collaborate, problem-solve, and exercise.⁶⁴ As our children grow and develop physically and cognitively, so do their needs for different forms of play.

Based on our investigations, successful spaces provide a wide range of spaces and



playground.nyc’s Adventure Playground on Governors Island. Credit: Urban Design Forum.

features for youth to actively choose where to go, what to do, and creatively explore what might be possible. At the Lab School, students voiced their need for large, highly visible, flat spaces for active groups and sports; small, intimate gathering spaces for small groups or individuals to sit and chat; play structures for climbing and claiming space at different heights; and natural features for quiet relaxation. Abstract, interpretive structures and equipment encourage more open-ended play so that students can independently explore what a space or object means and how it can be used. The best play structures encourage children to test the bounds of their level of risk, where they must evaluate risk and practice responsibility.

Youth deserve to influence the spaces they inhabit. Our investigation found that the most effective community engagement involved recurring engagement with youth in the design of outdoor spaces and programming. Outdoor learning and play initiatives flourish when youth, teachers, staff, and community members are involved from the beginning to guide, champion, and sustain programs. Youth-centered engagement to develop and maintain school spaces help students develop concrete skills in spatial design, engineering, environmental planning, design thinking, leadership, and advocacy. They can lead to feelings of pride and ownership in shaping their spaces and develop a greater sense of connectedness.

Case Study #10

Smith Houses Playground Lower East Side, Manhattan



Credit: Urban Design Forum.

About This award-winning colorful playground—co-designed by the [Smith Houses’](#) Tenants Association, NYCHA and [The Grain Collective](#)—is a multigenerational playspace used by residents, students and the broader community.

Impact Beautiful play design and a partnership between the adjacent school and NYCHA make this an example to scale across the city. Youth can experiment with flexible kinds of play, including physical, social, dramatic and nature play. The playground incorporates zones designated for high-intensity play like fun climbing structures and low-intensity play like a shaded seating structure with trees. Students at [PS 126 Jacob Riis](#), a nearby elementary school which doesn’t have a dedicated outdoor space, use the Smith Houses Playground throughout the day. Youth and the Tenants Association continue to steward the playspace.

“Kids have to control their bodies so much in the city. They don’t have the freedom to learn body limits, how it works, and move freely.”

- Kate Belski, Grain Collective

Case Study #11

The Lab School’s Schoolyard Chelsea, Manhattan



Credit: Urban Design Forum.

About In partnership with the [Trust for Public Land](#), [Studio HIP](#), [eDesign Dynamics Engineering](#) and City agencies, the school transformed their uninviting, enclosed asphalt lot into a vibrant community park with features like a running track, basketball courts, a climbing structure, an outdoor classroom, recycling station, gazebo with a green roof and fitness equipment.

Origin The Lab School’s new green playground was a project of the Mayoral Extreme Weather Task Force, established in 2021 to explore the City’s response to extreme weather events.

Impact This schoolyard redesign employed a 3-month hands-on design approach where students became the lead designers. They wanted to spend time outside year-round, and they designed the yard that way. The yard incorporates student murals and spaces to read, play ping pong, climb structures, play soccer or just hang out. As part of the design process, youth developed skills and knowledge in architecture, art installation, stormwater infrastructure, landscape architecture, site analysis and more.

Calls To Action

1. NYCPS and SCA should incorporate the following **design considerations** into their design guidelines and processes for outdoor learning and play spaces:
 - a. Age-appropriate elements for each age group using the space (e.g., shorter, smaller play structures and bright public markers for younger youth; elements and features that provide some privacy for older youth)
 - b. Eye-catching visuals (e.g., student murals on the floors and walls)
 - c. Litter-free space (e.g., compost, recycling, and trash bins)
 - d. Diverse materials and spaces (e.g., soft and hardscapes, natural materials, manipulable sensory toys)
 - e. Principles of adventure play⁶⁵ (e.g., freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated play with trained playworkers who support all young people)
 - f. Contextual programming elements (e.g., ping pong tables, gardening, science labs, socio-emotional learning workshops, or other ideas directed by students)
 - g. Access to a shed for collapsible outdoor furniture and tools that can be easily stored away
2. Local, state, and federal funders should **invest in maintaining and replacing nature-based materials**, like natural, manipulable, and creative equipment in schoolyards. Nature-based elements and varied textures create more engaging and stimulating spaces, promoting socialization, collaboration, and motor skill development.⁶⁶ Beautiful and exciting outdoor spaces are sources of community pride and connect people to nature and the city's ecology.
3. Local, state, and federal funders should develop grant programs that enable schools and outside partners to **compensate youth** for their leadership and partnership on design projects. Funders may consult the Forum on Youth Investment's guide, [How to Pay Young People: Considerations for Equity & Effectiveness](#), for youth's contributions to decision-making processes.
4. NYCPS should **develop a Playwork⁶⁷ guide** for school-based educators, staff and outside partners to learn how to guide and support youth play without deterring exploration and creativity. This guide should be developed collaboratively with partners who champion this work like [play:groundNYC](#).
5. NYCPS and DOT should collaborate to **create a "Kids Rule" Open Streets Day**, where youth design and program their local Open Street. DOT should provide youth-friendly elements to Open Street partners to encourage discovery and play.

Moving



Forward

“Children see and experience our cities at shorter heights, with fresher eyes and absorbent minds. It is our job to incorporate a child’s perspective into our thinking about the cityscape.”

- Aminah Ricks, [Future Planners](#)

All New York City youth deserve climate-resilient and safe spaces that strengthen their mental and physical health, build connection and belonging, and foster their agency and autonomy. We call on the City to prioritize and expand youth-centered, community-driven outdoor spaces at NYC public schools—like schoolyards, streets, and more—to meet the fundamental needs of our young people.

This report highlights how New York City can become a leader in expanding outdoor spaces for youth in dense urban environments—with a more significant investment of resources and greater alignment between youth, caregivers, and government agencies.

Public and private funders, including City agencies and philanthropic institutions, should invest in measuring the impact of outdoor spaces on youth development, including in-depth evaluations and multi-year, multidisciplinary research studies. Additional research and evaluations would help establish policy and standards and provide qualitative and quantitative data for replicating outdoor learning programming and design across the city. Measuring impact could also help the

City advocate for additional funding and training.

We also see many opportunities to strengthen existing partnerships to reach every public school, including partnerships with [Edible Schoolyards NYC](#), [Equity Design](#), the [Horticultural Society of New York](#), [playground:NYC](#), [PowerPlay NYC](#) and the [Trust for Public Land](#), as well as City agency programs like DOHMH’s Active Design and Mental Health by Design, DOT’s Open Streets and NYCPS’ Green Teams.

And most importantly, we need *you* to build a youth-friendly city by spreading awareness on this issue, advocating for quality public spaces for youth, and calling on your local leaders to integrate youth in decision-making processes. We believe in a future where youth are free to be, create, learn, play and grow.

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Page 47: Rooftop at Brooklyn Children’s Museum. Credit: Urban Design Forum.
 Page 49: Credit: Urban Design Forum.
 Page 53: Youth workshop at PAL Wynn Center. Credit: Urban Design Forum

Appendix



Social Connection & Belonging Questionnaire

Student Groups

- When you hear “belonging,” what do you think of?
- When you hear “connection,” what do you think of?
- What are some spaces within your school where you feel a sense of belonging? Why?
- What are spaces in your school where you have felt isolated or disconnected? Why?
- Where do you meet your friends?
 - Is it easy to make friends at school?
 - If it’s not easy, what factors do you think make it difficult?
- What about your school environment makes you feel safe and free to express yourself?
 - How did your teacher contribute to this?

Teachers/School Staff

- When you hear “belonging,” what do you think of?
- When you hear “connection,” what do you think of?
- What are some spaces in your school where you have observed students feeling a sense of belonging? Why?
- What are some spaces within your school where you have observed students feeling isolated or disconnected? Why?
- What aspects of the school environment lead to opportunities for students to build friendships?
- What aspects of the school environment are not conducive to students building friendships?
- What aspects of a school environment do you think make students feel safe and free to express themselves?
- What opportunities exist for you to meaningfully connect with students, staff, and parents within your school community?

Parent Groups

- When you hear “belonging,” what do you think of?
- When you hear “connection,” what do you think of?
- What are the spaces in your child’s school that you have observed them feeling a sense of belonging?
- What are the spaces within your child’s school where you have observed them feeling isolated and disconnected?
- Do you feel a sense of belonging in your child’s school?
- What aspects of the school environment allow students to build friendships?
- What aspects of the school environment enable parents to develop relationships with one another? With teachers and other school staff?
- What aspects of the school environment allow for your child to feel safe and express themselves?

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