



Kids in a Green School Park
Photo Credit: Hayden Brooks

Austin's New Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights and Cities Connecting Children to Nature Plan

By Hayden Brooks

In March of 2016, the City of Austin was selected as one of six cities nationwide to receive a planning grant from the National League of Cities and the Children & Nature Network for [Cities Connecting Children to Nature](#). Historically, Austin has battled systemic issues of equity and segregation that have created major barriers to nature access for children all over the city.

[Austin's Cities Connecting Children to Nature \(CCCN\)](#) planning team views the issue of equitable nature access as a deeply complex social problem that no single policy, program,

nonprofit or government agency can solve on its own. As a result, we adopted the "collective impact" planning process that brought together ten different city departments, leaders from the Austin School District, the health sector, dozens of nonprofits and many others to create our three-year long [Implementation Plan](#).

Our plan identifies how city leadership can provide abundant and equitable nature access for all children in Austin, with a specific focus on greening school parks in low-income communities of color. Our planning effort resulted, just this past January, in the Austin

City Council providing unanimous approval for the CCCN Plan and the [Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights](#) (opposite page), which was signed by over 1,000 Austinites.

The CCCN Planning Team also hopes to build upon the energy of the City Hall press conference (shown below with Austin's Mayor Steve Adler, Council Members, School Trustees, Department Heads, Executive Directors, teachers, students and parents) to use the Outdoor Bill of Rights to promote the work we'll be doing on our CCCN Plan.

Our interdepartmental and cross-sector CCCN planning team identified for ourselves the five key elements of collective impact that include: a common agenda; mutually reinforcing activities; shared metrics; continuous communication; and a backbone organization. These elements of collective impact support our four major strategies:

- **Policy Tracking:** Developing and proposing nature access policies to include in Austin's new Land Development Code and also across the many city departmental master plans.
- **Public Awareness Campaign:** Informing people across Austin about the importance of regular nature access for healthy childhood development.
- **Park Programming and Activation:** Creating a comprehensive nature-based program directory and aligning those programs with school parks in neighborhoods with low "nature equity" scores.
- **Greening School Yards:** Creating a network of school parks at elementary campuses co-owned by the Austin School District and the City of Austin in neighborhoods with low "nature equity" scores.

Our CCCN Plan's goal is to provide daily access to rich nature environments for tens of thousands of underserved students AND strengthen communities with nearby nature across our entire city. As the "backbone organization," Austin's Parks and Recreation Department

will be working with elementary schools in Austin's School District that have co-owned parkland with the Parks Department to develop a network of green school parks. The overarching goal will be to work with every elementary school's students, teachers, parents and the surrounding community to design, construct and then program new nature spaces in the schoolyards. The new nature spaces will act as outdoor learning and play environments for students and teachers during the school day AND rich nature environments for the surrounding community to enjoy outside of school hours.

Green schoolyards provide a powerful opportunity to address a wide array of community

benefits all at once. Every community has its own green schoolyard - some are developing an interest in growing vegetable gardens or creating habitats for pollinators; others are interested in hands-on outdoor science instruction to help improve academics. Increasingly, we see cities using this type of public property to help manage storm water.

What makes school parks such an effective strategy is that regardless of the particular benefit that starts the initial activity, many other benefits will follow. Green schoolyards increase the value of any investment through this unique multiplier effect.

And with limited resources and constituencies for biophilic cities we should see green schoolyards as a valuable tool that can bring new partners and new funding streams to the biophilic cities movement for the benefit of children, families and biophilic cities all around the world.

Resources

Austin Parks and Recreation. Austin's Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights. Retrieved from www.austintexas.gov/cobor.

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Austin City Hall Press Conference for CCCN and COBOR
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