

# Case Studies

Joint use agreements vary greatly in scope, shaped largely according to the character of the community they are designed to serve. This chapter looks at how joint use agreements expanded opportunities for exercise in six very different communities across the nation.

## Boston, Massachusetts

Population	617,594
Development pattern	High-density city
Population density	12,760 per square mile of land
Median household income	\$39,629
Partners involved	City of Boston Boston Public Schools Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative Boston Schoolyard Initiative

Many Boston schoolyards were paved over in the 1950s when city leaders discovered that asphalt cuts down maintenance costs. This left many of the city’s schools – which serve roughly 56,000 students, 72 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced lunch – without any available green space. Many of the playgrounds built after the 1950s were set on top of asphalt surfaces.

Today, a large-scale partnership between the city, private donors, a schoolyard nonprofit, and the public school system is improving play opportunities for Boston’s children. Launched in 1995, the partnership uses informal agreements to guide its efforts.

In 16 years, 81 schoolyards have been revitalized into vibrant spaces that encourage both playing and learning; a multi-subject curriculum helps educators teach math, writing, science, and more using these playgrounds. More than 25,000 children have been reached, and the spaces are open for neighborhood enjoyment. And all that asphalt? More than 130 acres have been reclaimed.

“I was amazed at how well the original documentation works,” says Myrna Johnson, the executive director of the Boston Schoolyard Initiative. “One of the guiding documents – the first task force



report written in 1995 – continues to guide our work. There are no hard-copy versions around anymore, but I have a scanned version, and I hold onto it like the Bible.”

The task force report came about in the early 1990s when the Boston Globe Foundation wanted to award grants to community groups to improve the city’s environment. Its executive director, Suzanne Maas, established the Urban Land Use Task Force to gather input from private and public health, housing, and community organizing groups, along with school administrators, community members, environmental advocates, health professionals, and other funders. Schoolyards quickly surfaced as one of the group’s five top priorities.

The local philanthropy community also got involved, spearheaded by the Boston-based The Philanthropic Initiative (TPI). With private foundation and individual funding sources, constituent support, and organizational backing, the Boston GreenSpace Alliance (a nonprofit dedicated to protecting the city’s parks and open spaces) reached out to Mayor Thomas Menino in 1994 and asked him to use his political clout to further their cause.

The groups decided to establish the Boston Schoolyard Initiative (BSI), which would work directly with schools to design and complete projects. It would be supported by a private entity, the Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative (BSFC). BSI launched in 1995 as part of a five-year initiative. The mayor committed \$10 million in city funds over five years to the initiative.

From the beginning, BSI envisioned these playgrounds as both play and educational spaces. “Their proximity to schools cries out for a higher degree of interactivity, and they offer us the opportunity to combine recreation, creative play, and academic learning,” BSI notes in its literature.

The features of each space are colorful, interactive, and unique to that particular community. All use engaging focal points geared toward both students and local residents. Some spaces may feature brightly colored artwork. In some schools children elect to have maps of the globe painted on the asphalt. Each of the redesigned playgrounds includes built structures and play equipment. Some include natural elements like boulders, trees, grass, and other plants.

Features in the schoolyards are integrated into the curriculum. Tracks around the school offer math teachers the opportunity to teach students about circumference. Timing children as they run around the track can teach students how to calculate miles per hour.

Every three years, the groups meet to select which schools will receive new schoolyards, and how much money each group will contribute. A memo then goes to the mayor’s office for his approval, but the working group makes the choices and then moves forward with the plans.

“Our relationship with Boston is rather informal,” Johnson says. “We have an application and review process that helps us make decisions involving the city, Boston Public Schools, and the Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative – the three groups that make up the Boston Schoolyard Initiative. But there are really no legal documents guiding the collaboration.

“In some ways it’s an asset, because it allows us to be very flexible,” she adds. “Joint use agreements are now in vogue. But these projects were always designed to serve the broader community, not just the school. So the joint use approach is just built into the process.”

The BSFC pays for staffing the initiative and is increasingly supporting capital costs, plus a planning grant for schools. The city currently contributes about \$3 for every \$1 in private funding on the capital side. But when you include private funding for educational programming, the ratio is closer to \$2 to \$1.

The yearly capital investment in the BSI is estimated at \$1.1 million from the city and \$300,000 from the Funders Collaborative. The BSFC also invests at least \$150,000 annually in education programs.

The original plan was for a five-year public commitment. But with continued support from both private funders and the public, the program is ongoing. BSI currently has three projects in the planning phase; when construction is complete, nearly 90 Boston schools will enjoy creative outdoor play spaces.

With the schoolyard renovation process going smoothly, BSI is able to focus increasingly on curriculum development. Communities across the country are now modeling their own curriculum after the city’s innovative approaches.

“Boston has led the way on making curriculum connections between science and writing,” Johnson says. “I think it’s very exciting – we’re harvesting the power of the schoolyard to deepen student learning.”