

Unpaving Schoolyards

by Rosey A. Jencks

In Petaluma, high school students restore a local creek and raise fish in their student-run hatchery.

In Berkeley, the Edible Schoolyard teaches children about nutrition and the connections between a healthy ecosystem and our food production. World famous chef Alice Waters gets fast food-loving children to eat vegeta-

thing that we interact with each day, and not in some faraway place. By changing the consumption patterns of a school, saving or creating energy, reducing and treating wastes on site, and opening up the ground to absorb rainwater, we can teach children real skills for living lightly on the earth.

the school. Neighborhoods that feel ownership over their schoolyard will protect and use the space that is typically unused during non-school hours.

Most schoolyards are asphalt wastelands designed without regard for the natural systems that support them or the neighborhoods in which they are located. This waste of space is even more unfortunate when we consider that many neighborhoods do not have a park or open space within walking distance, but are close to a school with a large asphalt lot. By greening these schools, we could open up the space so more neighborhoods could enjoy contact with nature.

At Tule Elk Park in the Marina District, the “greened” schoolyard is used by the community on the weekends. Because the schoolyard is so



At Tule Elk Park in the Marina District an asphalt schoolyard was transformed into a green play and learning environment.



bles that they grow and cook themselves from the school garden.

In Balboa Park, Life Frames Inc. is coordinating a planning process to reconnect the redesign of the schoolyard to the neighborhood and its natural and cultural history of their neighborhoods.

Communities around the country are organizing to improve the barren conditions of their schoolyards. By unpaving and redesigning these asphalt lots, residents are creating outdoor classrooms that serve to beautify the neighborhoods, improve the condition of local natural systems and promote involvement in their schools. It's time that San Francisco joined the green schools movement.

Ecological schoolyards provide authentic environmental education—working with real ecological processes rather than simply reading about them. Using schoolyards to garden, create wildlife habitat, compost the school's kitchen wastes or treat stormwater teaches children that nature is some-

SCHOOLYARDS AS NEIGHBORHOOD RESOURCES

Our city has chronically underfunded its parks. Our community gardens have long waiting lists. And our schools are strapped for space. In San Francisco's open space-poor neighborhoods, strategically greening our schoolyard spaces can help meet the demand for public open space.

Groups have found that a participatory design process that involves neighbors, parents, kids and teachers promotes more ownership of the space and volunteerism in the schools. Redesigns that improve the neighborhood will help to bring more people and volunteers into the school space, serving both the neighborhoods and

beloved, families return to the yard for birthday parties and to volunteer to paint or improve the school. This innovative project has the schoolyard double as a public park that is staffed on the weekends by the Rec. and Park Department. This kind of resource sharing between public agencies is simply a sensible way to make the best use of public funds. Opening up the schoolyard to the neighborhood provides more community space for creative play, and a place for the community to gather.

IMPROVING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BUILT AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Unpaving and greening schoolyards is not just a symbolic exercise—the land

area can be used for real ecological functions.

Take, for example, the issue of rainwater. In San Francisco, our sewage system unwisely combines storm water runoff and sewage, creating overflow and public health hazards in times of heavy rain. By unpaving our schoolyards and redirecting the runoff to vegetated areas, we can give children the opportunity to learn about the cycles of water and the way that our built environment affects the earth and other people.

Greening schools can also save the public money. In Los Angeles, the Department of Water and Power teamed up with the LA Unified School District to remove 30% of the asphalt from school property (enough pavement to build a four-lane highway from LA to San Francisco). The district found that this greening project saves 20 percent of the electricity cost for air conditioning and traps 50 gallons of storm water for each tree they plant. A report issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service reports that each dollar spent on the cool schools project

returns approximately \$2.37 in reduced energy expenditures, improved air quality and associated benefits like increased property value.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

There are important roles for both the school district and private organizations to play to make San Francisco's schoolyards something of which we can be proud.

The city and school district should enact policies that support greening schoolyards. We can establish a set of citywide schoolyard design guidelines requiring a certain percentage of soft surfacing on all new designs and school retrofits. Additionally, we can require, possibly by a ballot measure, the schools to adopt greening programs that improve the environmental performance of both the school and its yard.

The Boston Schoolyard Initiative is a city-funded grant-making program that oversees the redesign, renovation, and programming of schoolyards. They have successfully redesigned over 100 schoolyards. Communities apply for matching funds to pay for the renovation. The organization provides

technical assistance and funding for the design capital costs and programming of the spaces.

In San Francisco, a non-profit similar to the Boston Schoolyard Initiative could advocate for the creation, funding and on-going programming of ecological schoolyards. This non-profit group could help the district with funding, technical assistance and serve as an umbrella organization to further the agenda of environmental learning in the schools. This group would support the district rather than ask it to take on an additional responsibility. It would provide funding and technical assistance with the design and planning process and support for teacher and educational tie-ins.

A group of educators, parents, planners, and environmentalists have been meeting at SPUR to take action on unpaving and greening San Francisco's schoolyards. Contact Rosey Jencks, program coordinator at SPUR, at rjencks@spur.org for more information.

*Rosey Jencks is the program coordinator at SPUR. **