**Questions for Trust for Public Land**

<https://www.tpl.org/our-work/minnesota-healthy-community-schoolyards>

1) Can you speak about what a nature-rich schoolyard that addresses climate, health, and educational inequities looks like? How does that differ in function and experience from most schoolyards?

2) Healthy Community Schoolyards program creates spaces designed through a place-based community-led participatory design process, and open and welcoming to the public. Can you explain the engagement process?

3) Why is the publicly-owned aspect of schoolyards important to this work?

4) Can you speak specifically to how the Community Schoolyards program combats inequities and mitigates the impacts of climate change?

5) Can you speak a little about the statewide assessment of Minnesota’s schoolyards? This identification of high-need and high-opportunity priority areas for conversion – would the GIS data for this be publicly available?

6) Can you provide us with an example school/schools for consideration in our work? (Especially within the twin cities region)

7) Is there an environmental justice focus to assess high-need and high-opportunity Minnesota schoolyards?

Eric (MET): The first question into the chat here, Can you speak to, again I pulled this form the website but I can you speak about what a nature rich school yard that addresses climate health and education inequalities looks like, do you guys have a vision of that and how does that differ in function and experience from most school yards. I mean I can imagine what you mean but it would be nice to hear from you.

ERIC (TPL): So I'll give you like the typical response, it depends. So far our program and I should say we're close to 300 School yards across the country. In the twin cities and in Minnesota we haven't yet renovated one. But we have a model that we are working off of that tpl has had for 25 years. Basically our school yard program is as much about the final product as it is about the process. Each school yard that we partner with the final design is dependent on community engagement, school engagement, school budgets and space. We lay a menu of opportunities and work with various partners to design that school yard. But basically the average school yard is pretty uninspiring. In many places they are a sea of asphalt. I grew up playing in a parking lot, in the twin cities we are luckier. With a playground plot and athletic facilities. Our goal is to health, climate, equity, additionally add trees, landscaping, creation of pollinator gardens, edible gardens, gardens, outdoor classrooms, some type of storm water treatment, rain garden, etc. Some of our projects in the east coast have underground systems. We are really look at from a health equity perspective not every kid wants to play basketball, they may just want a walking trail, or a quiet space, or space to be an introvert on the playground to play by themselves. We are really looking at what the school and community want, and how we can help to begin to solve some of those problems. The biggest piece of our work on school yard for TPL is that we really emphasize the public side of our name. All our projects we work on have to be open to the public. It has to be a public park, if it's a school yard we recognize there are some safety concerns but outside of regular school hours, nights, weekends, summer vacations or winter vacations. Those places should be open and welcoming to the public. We are really looking at these existing places whether they are public or private or charter, does not really mean too much to people's health or health of the planet. How can we take those spaces, turn the dial up on them and then make sure people know they can use those spaces. Does that answer your question?

Eric (MET): That’s excellent, the next question you kinda addressed. But you might want to go in a bit more detail on this. I wanted to comment on something you said and it's also on the website. It's not just about enhancing these spaces, but it's also about the accessibility. I never really thought about the fact that like the multifunction of a school playground outside of school hours or in the off season when students are not in, it could actually serve the community better than it does. Cause right now quite often those spaces are not really used, they are vacant. Thinking about that broader more neighborhood audience. The next question is more, you kind of talked about this a little bit. The healthy community schoolyard program create spaces designed through a place-based, community-led, participatory design approach of course this all from your website and open and welcome to the public. Can you explain this engagement process?

Eric (TPL): So what we really like to do is work with the school community and because we want these to be spaces to be open and welcoming to the public, work with the broader community as well. So we really developed two parallel processes but thats really not quite true. Because we are trying to ingrain those two processes at various points. We really trying to develop a broad work group or student committee that makes up parents, teachers, residents, school district folks, city folks, park folks, and really whoever has an interest and stake in school spaces and outdoors. We work really closely with usually one classroom and a lot of these end up being elementary school but also work with middle school and high school and really no limits. But If we are working with an elementary school K-5, we will work with a 4th grade class or one to two classes, which they really become the “classroom readers”, but we take the project and integrate it into the classroom curriculum so that it's a project based learning opportunity. We introduce them to the concept of what could a schoolyard be and do lots of visioning and take them on a couple of field trips, take them to other playgrounds. Have them go out and play around, touch, smell, see, all the various aspects. Then we talk about kinda of every week, we talk about a different topic, so we'll talk about democracy, collaboration, consensus building, equity, climate, environment, a section on water, trees, pollinators, and climate change. Tailor each curriculum to each school's need and availability. The STEM schools are like yep that's right up our alley and are really excited about it. Some others are little bit more cautious and don’t have the available school hours. And then we bring in a designer, guest speakers to talk about those different topics and go through a design process where really the students are the ones leading a lot of the work and also taking on somewhat of a leadership role to engage the rest of the student population. Some of our programs students have helped to create a survey ,then they go out and talk to other students, a first grade class and ask what are you all interested in the new playground. And then do a bunch of community workshops and meetings. Then we come up with a couple of designal standards and look at a budget, make some cuts as most projects have to and then TPL helps a lot with the program management, approvals, the various aspects of getting a project completed, help with fundraising and the big thing we try to work on is stewardship. One of the reasons school yards are the way that they are is because they [schools] want them easily to be maintained. So it's anything the maintenance crew can get out, get on a mower and mow it all down and call it a day. We always try to work with custodial crews, building facilities on the design, we try to push them and one of the ways to help to try to get them on board is through the additional stewardship support. We are trying to make these spaces owned and managed by the community, used by teachers, helping teachers to get outside to use these spaces during the day. We help to develop a “friends of the schoolyard” group and help them think about what long term stewardship looks like. So that ideally we don't develop a new pollinator garden and then it's overrun by weeds three years later.

Eric (MET): I appreciate that you know we've gone through a similar journey with our facilities people at our waste water treatment plant, we are trying to convert all the grael out of the grass into native planting and that has been a journey. But education is so critical of that but one thing you said that was really interesting is that I have been up to tacomo high school with the youth engagement planning organization, trying to talk to young people about the career of planning. And it is so interesting to me, that so many young people especially first generation immigrants we are speaking to, were kinda expressing shock and surprise that they had a stake in their environment, go to city hall or advocate for something. Or that their neighborhood doesn't have to look a certain way, and that it's all planned. And they could actually be involved in the process and I think for a lot of them they were like wow. I just thought this was just how it happens, almost by accident, but no someone is actually making decisions and you can be involved in that decision making process. A lot of them were really surprised by that. So I think what you were saying about kids getting involved and is almost teaching them about civics, and how to be a member of society and be engaged and be interested in your surroundings and its super important and it's so much more than just the infrastructure that you guys come out with on the other side. But you are creating this situation where kids are being engaged in this moving forward.

Eric (TPL): I know we can all think back to Elementary School and you don't remember and you can go whole years and I dont remember anything or something that maybe happened on the playground but you dont remember a lot of classroom stuff but some of those unique projects something like helping to renovate your school yard is one of those projects that could stick with people and they will really help to take those concepts and tie them directly to something you can interact with. So I think that's one of the really cool opppurintines for long term impact and we also try to integrate career exploration into part of the conversation. You think that theres a job to help renovate playgrounds or your super interested in water and heres another job for you.

Eric (MET): Question number three, this is kidna of getting at the nexus of equity and climate. Can you speak specifically on how the community school yard program combats inequity and mitigates the impacts of climate change?

Eric (TPL): So I think beyond the obvious, I can speak on a couple of examples. One of our projects was in New Orleans in an area that flooded both during hurricane katrina but also regularly with large stormwater events. On that site, the focus was on how to mitigate flooding and how to handle the large amounts of water that pool down on this playground and students would not be able to play ont he groundwater cause there was sitting water. This is one explicit example changing the site design to directly address climate change and its impact. Not only did they integrate stormwater management but also the cooling effects of trees, all the benefits of trees on stormwater. In Philadelphia, there was a consent decreding, one of our big partners there, not sure if it was a watershed district or water department. That helped to fund a lot of these projects because the city had to do something about water. I think often times in a fully developed place, your opportunities for large-scale impact are really not far between or if you are waiting for new development, so taking school yards which are big spaces to address those issues is a big win and you don't get that with other projects. Plus you get this opportunity to educate students and develop new leaders, new environmental stewards. We know that with urban heat islands it can be 17 degree difference within a couple of blocks and oftentimes school yards are in the middle of urban heat islands in the local level. So being able to cool those spaces is very critical. The one thing I have been suggesting to folks is like when we have all gone down a really hot slide and know how not fun it is. So being able to not have hot slides is a small goal of ours.

Jonathan (MET): I wanted to interject very quickly to add upon the question, when you are thinking about community school yards, are you primarily focusing on elementary schools because when I look at the website and look at the photos that are shown and see that its mostly K-6 grade and I see a really strong elementary school focus. Of course right those different groups, elementary school, middle school, high school, have different ways to engage them and engagement strategies are needed, what's the primary focus when you mention community school yards, and who is that specifically targeting?

Eric (TPL): So the program really will work with any school. I think we mostly end up working with elementary schools because they use their outdoors more which is kinda unfortunate when you think about it. You go to high school, and suddenly you don’t go outside unless its like for gym class or skipping class. I mean you are inside of the day which is unfortunate. Luckily some of that is changing. We are seeing more and more outdoor spaces, gathering plazas, outdoor classrooms, and even more gardening spaces. I would love to do a high school project, middle school project. I think the one big thing is that oftentimes we are trying to leverage public dollars that may be already allocated to renovate a playground. Which a playground (equipment) can easily be 100,000 dollars so if there's an opportunity where there are some public dollars and time to invest to renovate the space, we can tack onto that and to add additional support to take it to the next level. We are totally open, one thing in Minnesota that we are kind of taking a different approach then some of our other offices, we are really open to the entire state. Lots of our programs work with individual school districts. In NYC's huge school district, more people in NYC then in all of Minneasote, lots of opportunities there. For us we are trying to take a data informed approach so we just completed an assessment of all 2600 schools in Minnesota looking at health, equity and climate. We took school level data and community level data really that ten minute walking shed. And analyzed where our highest need schools and highest opportunity schools. So we mapped that out and don't have that on our website. We are going to develop a new web viewer. But we really want to go to the schools not where there is the most interest, most organized PTO, or the most money, we want to go where there is the best opportunity to have a big impact. We are going to use that data to really drive where we pattern with folks.

Eric (MET): I’m thinking about the tool that we are creating, my goodness if you are creating a high opportunity priority area and ranking that with the schools. That could be a really interesting addition to our tool. Thinking about the area or have a more interesting look at that school TPL ranking but look at the neighborhood that has low tree canopy. This could be an interesting lens to bring to this and maybe that's something we can add down the line but it sounds like it is not publicly available yet right ?

Eric (TFL): I can send you the excel file, we just don't have it up on our website.

Eric (MET): I might run that pass our team but want to make sure you guys are good with that but it could be interesting cause we are trying to add all these different metrics and this could be another way to customize this tool and look through the school yard lens and then obviously have your information on there so people can contact TPL if they want to go down that road. This could end up in stakeholder hands that you guys might have not thought of and drive the project and connect you folks.

Eric (TPL): All sounds fantastic, I can send you the data we used, it's not perfect by any means. The one thing we ran into, statewide assessment, park serve/park score, is What data is available across the board for different data privacy. There are a lot of big schools and a lot of small schools where the department of education does not release that much data to protect the students. So we had some limitations on the data and hopefully next year we will be able to tinker with it a little bit more. A living assessment but happy to chat ways to share information or collaborate. It’s been an interesting exercise and like I saids if you ever want to connect with our research & innovation team, our data and gis wizards who are great at thinking about these issues.

Eric (MET): So I just got one more question but one more I missed and you kinda talked about it and I don't know but when I was reading the website it was suggesting that most of this was publicly owned land or is that always the case cause you mentioned charter school and my question is why is publicly owned school yards, why is that important for it to be publicly owned or not?

Eric (TPL): That's one thing we are I think toying around with, I do not think TPL has done a private school project. I know we have done public charter school, charter schools cant own the school building, so they are typically owned but not always the case. ⅔ of schools are publicly owned, public schools and I think the important piece of that similarly to parks, these are spaces we are collectively paying for the benefit of society. To make sure we are getting the most of our public investments, I think that is really important. Same for parks, making sure they are high quality spaces, accessible, welcoming and I think that's the same for our school yards. Especially during nights, weekends and summer to not have those space go unused and to get the health and equity and climate benefits that's a no brainer. We want to use those spaces well, and most of the time they are uninspired spaces which is the term I hear a lot from different, usually from schools, that say we got this playground but its really uninspiring. Let's have a space that meets community needs.

Eric (MET): The reason I asked that question, there is a big question around this project about land tenure because the public right of way, we can do things with that cities can messa round, interventions, public parks, but what we hear from foresters in their surveys is that privately owned is really challenging. We can't necessarily go right into those spaces and do anything. When thinking about emerald ashburn and things like that again private landowners are the challenge there. I guess the last question, you guys have not started yet, is there any school you would recommend us to connect with that is already doing this, thinking in this way or do you of any in Minnesota?

Eric (TPL): So nothing official, we are looking at a partnership with brooklyn center elementary school, we have a handshake agreement nothing on paper yet. They have been doing a lot of work on small improvements on their site. A really great STEM teacher who's been trying to fundraise for more trees, she's putting 18 garden beds in the site. She’s a great champion, she was at the point where she was like there should be a much bigger vision of how we can renovate the entire space and not just little projects here and there. And like I said we will be signing an agreement shortly. Happy to connect with you to the Brooklyn center. Other then that, the difficulty with schools is that they are trying to get their head out of water, in survival mode. Been hard to really engage folks in anything other then just get through your day and survive. If anyone pops in my mind, I will let you know. We did a survey for schools, a qualitative on the ground responses, kind of a supplement to our GIS statewide assessment, interesting comment and feedback, there is a lot of interest, just a question of bandwidth at the moment.

Jonathan (MET): I did have one follow up, it was kind of addressed earlier but I do not think it was asked with the framing with how I wanted to ask the question. With regards to this project, I was going to ask you Eric, is there an EJ justice focus or component when the organization talks about high need, high opportunity school yards, I just want to know is that something the organization has considered or could be a potential extra focus to put within the project?

Eric (TPL): Yea you know, we are definitely trying to, that is definitely a focus. One of the reasons I was really excited about the brooklyn center is that it's right along highway 100, right along the freeway. That has been an acknowledgement and priority for us, looking at asthma rates of students. Another school we have been having conversations with is Maxfield elementary school in Rounda which is also right along a freeway. That I think, between air quality, noise pollution, stress, toxic stress, etc. I can send you the statewide assessment and you can look at some of the data we looked at, we had a lot more to consider at some point it got to be too much and we had to pull back a little bit. But we have been looking at mental health and one of the things we looked at was the number of friendships and that idea of loneliness. Something that I think was an issue before the pandemic and now is only worse I think. So we are really trying to think about EJ for sure, and how we integrate that into a project, in conversations with a 4th grade class but it is definitely a priority of our program and TPL nationally.

Eric (MET): I think that's probably all we have unless you have anything for us you want to share.

Eric (TPL): I am sure I’ll think of something after we hang up, I’ll email you if I do, But it's been great to chat, lets definitely stay in contact and maybe there will be something with brooklyn center that Ill be coming knocking on the MET council.

Eric (MET): This is super cool what you guys are doing. It's such an under the radar but obvious area to focus in, when you think about the type of land and acreages, and the educational opportunity, it is huge and really cool.

Eric (TPL): I am really excited about it, it kinda seems like an under the radar project. Next up cemeteries, golf courses, etc. We can think of some others, it is a really exciting project for sure and for the MET council we end up doing lots of field trips. Some of our programs have gone out to wastewater facility treatment plants and regional parks.

Eric (MET): Any opportunity to connect young people with what we are doing at MET council would be helpful. Thanks a lot Eric, I appreciate your time thanks!

Johnny (MET): Thank you Eric!