



Atlanta Community Schoolyards

Connecting Atlanta's children
and communities to the joys
and benefits of the outdoors



TRUST FOR
PUBLIC
LAND™

Atlanta is known as a city in a forest. With nearly 450 parks and public outdoor spaces, about three out of four Atlanta residents have access to nature within a 10-minute walk of home. But what about the one in four who don't?

For more than 116,000 Atlanta residents, the benefits of the outdoors are out of reach. Like so many systemic challenges laid bare in recent years, the outdoor equity gap is part of a long history of under-investment in Black, Indigenous, Latino, immigrant, and low-income communities. In Atlanta, low-income communities have 33 percent less park space per person than high-income neighborhoods; and **communities of color have 48 percent less than predominantly white neighborhoods.**

“The students noticed that there was not a lot of green space where they live. Some of our scholars verbalized that it wasn't fair. They were able to see that there are strong discrepancies in certain pockets of our city, with lots of parks in some areas and few parks in other areas.”

— Summer Blackmon, STEAM Specialist, Centennial Academy

While many Atlanta schools are surrounded by nature, forests, and streams, they often lack the outdoor play structures, learning spaces, and amenities that students, teachers, families, and neighbors need for healthy, equitable, and resilient communities.



KIMBERLY ELEMENTARY BEFORE

Trust for Public Land is changing that with a common-sense solution: Community Schoolyards™

Every neighborhood has a local public school. What if every Atlanta schoolyard was designed by students and open to neighbors on evenings and weekends?

Atlanta Public Schools is one of the city's largest landowners, with almost 90 schools and over 50,000 students. By transforming schoolyards into vibrant, nature-rich parks, we can improve education, health, equity, and climate outcomes for students, families, and neighbors in the communities that need it most. TPL is leading a coalition of local and national partners to reimagine all of Atlanta's schoolyards, delivering **outdoor equity for hundreds of thousands of students and residents.**



KIMBERLY ELEMENTARY AFTER

Community Schoolyards represent an unprecedented opportunity to enhance public health, redress inequities, and improve climate resilience for students and the whole neighborhood. [Read TPL's groundbreaking report here.](#)

EDUCATION

Daily exposure to nature is associated with increased student engagement in learning, test scores, attendance, attention spans, graduation rates, and plans to attend a four-year college. Nature-rich schoolyards provide hands-on resources for teaching a wide range of subjects—from natural sciences to healthy diets to sustainable technologies; essential knowledge for generations of children facing the increasing impacts of climate change.

Learning in a stimulating, outdoor environment deepens students' education by providing a living laboratory for hands-on learning and thinking about nature. Plus, anecdotally, the more positive the school environment, the more students will want to come to school and learn. These are crucial resources for students who may not thrive in traditional class settings.

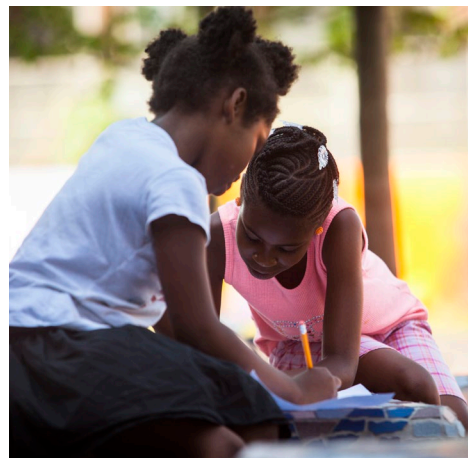
EQUITY

Our hands-on, student-led design process empowers communities to address broader disparities, improving health, economic, and learning outcomes, investing in historically underserved neighborhoods, and inviting the community to guide the vision for their shared schoolyard.

Decades of research show that green, accessible schoolyards also reduce negative behaviors, such as bullying, and promote positive early childhood development outcomes for youth living in urban and low-income neighborhoods. They also bolster opportunities for economic development and improve community cohesion.

CLIMATE

While all of us are in harm's way, low-income communities and people of color are especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Improving schoolyards for climate resilience and opening them to the public leads to a cascade of positive impacts on our climate: from absorbing torrential rainfall to capturing carbon from the atmosphere, reducing the harmful urban heat island effect, and encouraging local wildlife and pollination.



HEALTH

Safe, welcoming, high-quality green spaces boost public health and help reduce health disparities. By creating fun and vibrant places to play, transformed schoolyards encourage children to actively and creatively play during the school day—resulting in increased physical activity. Community Schoolyards also reduce stress, anger, and aggression and promote communication and relationship skills. Positive exposure to nature in the early years deepens student’s connection to and appreciation of nature later in life.

In addition to boosting the well-being of students during the school day, parents say the renovation of their children’s schoolyards greatly improved family life by providing additional nearby park space.



Atlanta Community Schoolyards



ATLANTA PUBLIC SCHOOLS



SCHOOLYARD RULES

- This schoolyard is open outside of school hours, from dawn to dusk daily
- APS activities have priority usage
- Be courteous and respectful of others
- Use at your own risk
- Adults must be accompanied by a child
- All games and activities that could damage the lawns are restricted
- APS permit required for events or organized athletics
- No selling of food or other items
- No weapons, smoking, illegal drugs, or chewing tobacco
- No alcohol
- No pets or animals, except for service or guide dogs
- No glass, bottles, or sharp objects
- No drones, remote-controlled planes, etc.
- No amplified music, spitting, inappropriate language, verbal abuse, or fighting
- Violators may be restricted from future use, ejected, fined, or assessed damages for repairs

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Questions? Call 404-802-0700 or visit www.atlantapublicschools.org

10 school communities

660 student designers and 370 community volunteers

Vibrant, healthy, nature-rich outdoor spaces serving over 20,000 people



**DOBBS
ELEMENTARY
BEFORE**

TPL launched the Atlanta Community Schoolyards program in 2019 with Atlanta Public Schools, Park Pride, and Urban Land Institute Atlanta to transform 10 schoolyards, delivering outdoor access for students, teachers, families, and neighbors across the city.

Using the nation’s leading tools and research from the Land & People Lab at TPL and Urban Land Institute Atlanta, we compiled comprehensive geographic and demographic data about Atlanta neighborhoods, including the ages, races, and incomes of residents, public health and climate threats, population forecasts, and city plans for future development. We then used TPL’s cutting-edge geographic information system (GIS) software to analyze all roads, parks, and schools in Atlanta, revealing which neighborhoods have no parks—but do have a nearby school.

“Community Schoolyards is such an innovative way to show our students how they can envision and appreciate land use. Our scholars and building leaders are so deserving of this time and place, but the neighboring community is just as deserving, and I definitely welcome the opportunity to share our school spaces as a community hug.”

— Dr. Lisa Herring, Superintendent,
Atlanta Public Schools

All of this data is publicly available as an interactive map using [TPL’s ParkServe™](#) website, the nation’s leading database and mapping system of parks and greenspaces. Anyone can login to explore where parks in Atlanta—or anywhere in the U.S.—can make a difference in public health, racial and economic equity, and climate resilience.

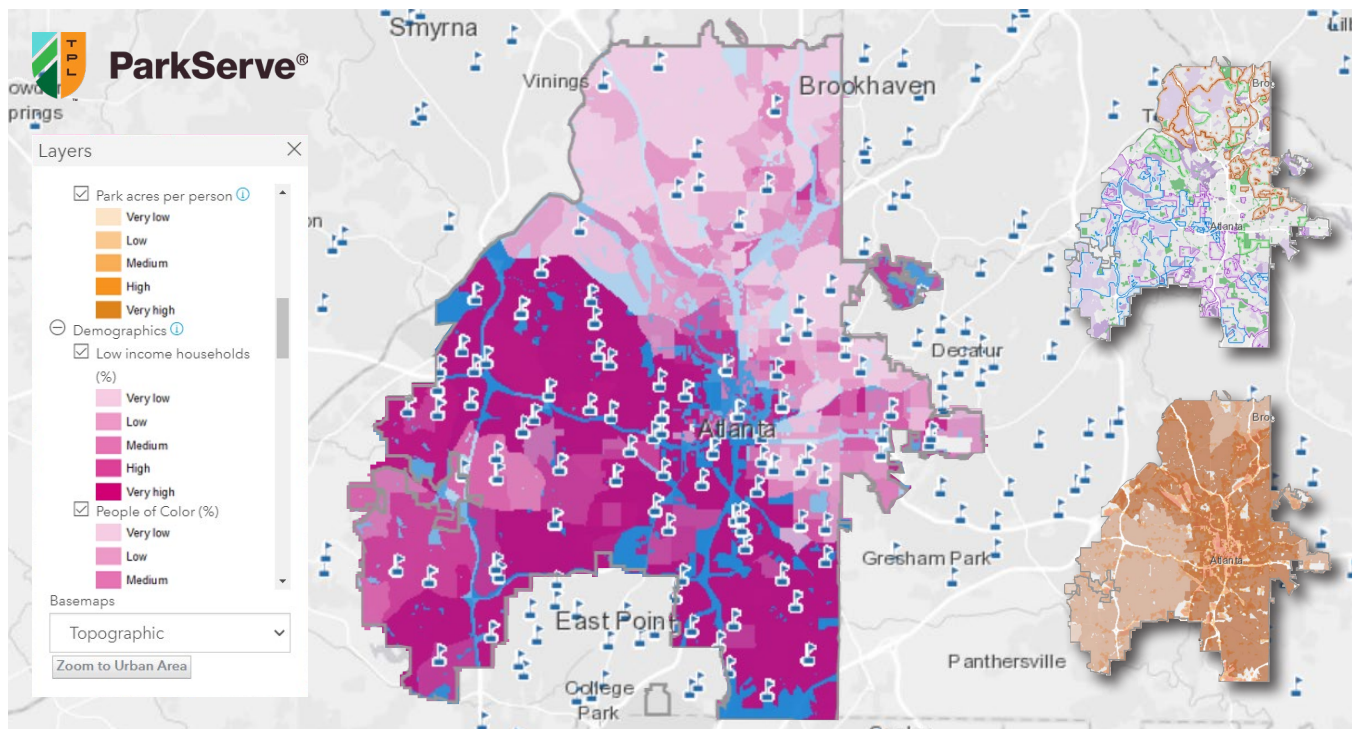
We also calculated the walkable area surrounding every Atlanta public school, measuring the number of residents, nearby greenspaces, and other amenities within walking distance. Our in-depth analysis showed which schools could make the biggest impact on Atlanta residents today—and helped identify which might make the biggest impact in the future as the city grows.

Together with students, community partners, residents, and Atlanta schools and city leadership, we are using this data to ensure that everyone has access to the outdoors in their own community.



Once we found which schools serve the largest number of people in need of a neighborhood park, we invited principals to meet with our team and learn more about TPL’s community-centered process, including student-led design curriculum, engaging with residents, construction timelines, and nature-based solutions to the environmental challenges facing each school.

After comparing the specific layouts of each school site and the expected density of future development in each neighborhood, we worked with Atlanta Public Schools to select ten schools where we can make the greatest impact and demonstrate the potential for community schoolyards across Atlanta and beyond.



“Creating healthy places for kids and families to spend time outside is incredibly important. But if the infrastructure in the surrounding neighborhood makes it almost impossible for people to walk or bike safely to where they need to be, then these schoolyard improvements won’t be achieving their maximum benefit.

– Daphne Bond-Godfrey, Executive Director, Urban Land Institute Atlanta

Urban Land Institute Atlanta is a District Council of the national Urban Land Institute (ULI), a nonprofit education and research group and multidisciplinary real estate forum with a mission to shape the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide. ULI’s local technical assistance panel brought special expertise to studying all the ways people might walk to and from each community schoolyard. They made a careful inventory of all possible routes and potential improvements, publishing a detailed report for each school. Residents, community-based organizations, and local government officials use these reports to advocate for new sidewalks, crosswalks, and neighborhood connections where they are needed most.

The first 10 Atlanta Community Schoolyards span a wide range of communities across the city.

Centennial Academy is in a dense urban neighborhood, and partners with the YMCA next door to share limited outdoor space. Students engaged in project-based learning and environmental justice advocacy, sharing their designs with school district leaders during the planning process.

Continental Colony Elementary has a highly engaged neighborhood including many former teachers. With access to a creek on its property, the school was selected to participate in the Department of Watershed Management's Green Infrastructure Design Challenge, and students designed a schoolyard to complement already-planned stormwater projects.

Dobbs Elementary borders an industrial area and boasts a huge, grassy field. Teachers used our schoolyard design process to help the school earn STEM certification, and we partnered with Delta to build the school's new outdoor learning center.



Harper-Archer Elementary is located in a former high school building, with many outdoor amenities, including a football field and track. Alumni of the high school hold reunions on site, and multiple murals in the building celebrate Black trailblazers throughout history.

Kimberly Elementary, located in a shaded, residential neighborhood, had play equipment for its younger students but lacked outdoor amenities for its older students. These older students led the design process for the school's new and improved outdoor spaces.

Miles Elementary is in a residential neighborhood and boasts an on-site clinic that serves community medical needs. Much of the campus is covered by forest, which is home to wildlife like birds and deer and serves as an engaging natural outdoor learning space.

Price Middle has an abandoned public housing project on one side and a new residential development on the other. The school is developing a large urban farm and teaching garden on its property, where students learn entrepreneurship and science skills.

Sarah Smith Elementary serves pre-K through 2nd grade, including multiple dual-immersion classes taught in English and Spanish. It partners with the Northside Youth Organization to care for and program a baseball field on campus, and abuts Blue Heron Nature Preserve.

Scott Elementary in northwest Atlanta nurtures many community partnerships for afterschool and extension programs. Like Dobbs Elementary, the school leveraged our schoolyard design process to earn STEM certification and establish a new community garden.

Toomer Elementary, located in East Atlanta, has large fields used by community soccer leagues. The school community is interested in opening access to a stream on campus and adding new pathways across the site to increase neighborhood connectivity.



Sarah Smith Elementary

Scott Elementary

Harper-Archer Elementary

Centennial Academy

Toomer Elementary

Miles Elementary

Kimberly Elementary

Price Middle

Continental Colony Elementary

Dobbs Elementary



Atlanta’s community schoolyards are designed by students for the entire neighborhood. We partner with teachers, school leaders, families, and neighbors to engage students in a customized curriculum and hands-on learning to educate, inspire, and design a schoolyard for everyone.

“ We never had to convince the students about the importance of parks! They knew already and were eager to share their imaginative designs with us.”

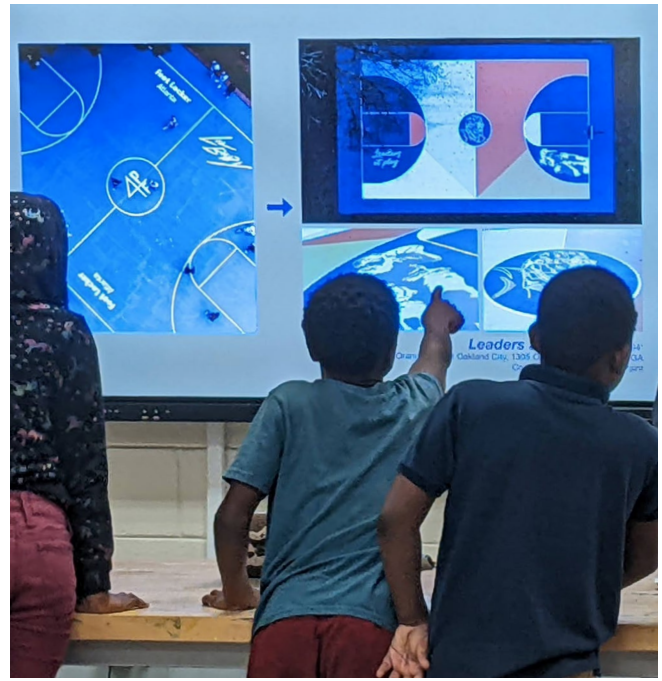
— Andrew White, Director of Park Visioning, Park Pride

Through the design process, we meet the community where they are, using a wide variety of engagement strategies. We join parent-teacher meetings and invite neighbors to attend information sessions and meet with the student designers. We build websites for each school and develop opinion surveys for both students and adults. And we work together with teachers to provide indoor and outdoor activities aligned with state learning standards, creating and analyzing data and budgets, exploring the plant and animal life around them, trying new forms of exercise and recreation, practicing persuasive writing to advocate for their community, learning about youth-led movements for climate and environmental justice, and more.



Founded in 1989, **Park Pride** engages communities across Atlanta to activate the power of parks through advocacy, volunteerism, and capital improvements. Its signature Park Visioning process guides community members through a public engagement process that converts each community’s ideas and dreams into an actionable plan to guide long-term park development. Park Pride designers built trusting relationships with key leaders at each school; created engagement opportunities for students, teachers, families, and neighbors; and distilled their collective feedback and data into comprehensive schoolyard designs.





The student-led design process culminates in a collaborative workshop. Student designers spend play money to purchase various schoolyard features—such as a new playground, basketball courts, outdoor classrooms, pavilions, and running tracks—and place them on a scale map of the school. To complete the workshop, students must negotiate how to stay within their budget and design the best possible schoolyard for their community, putting aside personal differences to achieve something greater for each other and the whole neighborhood.

Our hands-on design curriculum helps students feel a sense of agency, belonging, and ownership in their school, a process that is often just as powerful as the product: vibrant, healthy, nature-rich spaces with myriad benefits for children and the community.

Schoolyard Curriculum Topics

- Art and architecture
- Budgets
- Data, diagrams, and charts
- Ecology
- Environmental justice
- Flooding, erosion, and soil health
- Geometry and measurement
- Persuasive writing
- Physical education

“ We were just nationally and internationally STEM certified, and so this will give us an opportunity to continue that trajectory outside, hands-on, whether it’s mathematics, measuring things out here, building, planting, growing, and applying it to our standards-based curriculum.”

– Tiffany Ragin, Principal, Dobbs Elementary

TPL has assembled a powerful coalition of partners...



City of Atlanta Department of Watershed Management

LaunchPad Foundation

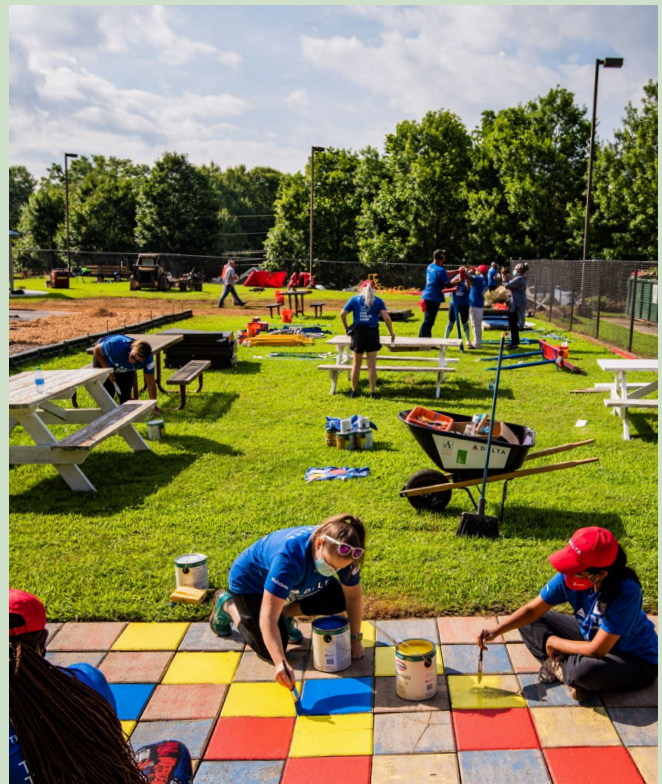
Trees Atlanta

Purpose Built Schools

The Village Tutorial

Fun-filled community build days bring together students, neighbors, and volunteers to install play structures and plant garden beds. Local partners like Trees Atlanta teach the community how to manage invasive plants and protect schoolyard trees, and supporters like Delta Air Lines bring helping hands to fulfill the community's vision.

Local artists and makers like Muhammad Suber work hand-in-hand with students and teachers to design and create colorful murals, signage, and other outdoor artworks, bringing the entire school community's creativity to life right before their eyes.



...and supporters to champion Atlanta's schoolyards!

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* Awarded to Park Pride



“Working with kids is always something to look forward to. They showed nothing but excitement from day one, and later really set the tone when it came to paint day on the court.”

— Muhammad Suber, Artist

We sat down with STEM Specialist Wanda McRae-Jones and Village Tutorial’s Cheryl Jones-Allie to share their experience teaching through gardening in the Scott Elementary Community Schoolyard.

Wanda McRae-Jones: We knew the schoolyard would be instrumental in having that connection between the community and the school. This is helping our babies and their families, and we have something that they can learn about, which is gardening. Not only are they learning about gardening or STEM skills, they’re learning about sustainability in their community, and they’re gaining entrepreneurial skills based off of what they’ve learned in this community schoolyard.

Cheryl Jones-Allie: When we’re in the garden, I make sure the children are understanding not only the ground and what grows from it, but also a lot of the history, a lot of reading, a lot of research, a lot of technology, a lot of math. We have a farmer rotation, so students can have the experience of different farmers, and also for students to see a physical representation of what they can grow into. And if the babies take it home to their elders, then the elders look at what the kids are doing and start to adopt the same habits. It’s a beautiful change for the community. It does teach everybody—all the stakeholders, parents, community members, staff, and students—the importance of eating healthy.

Wanda: Not only is our school in a food desert, we’re in a park desert. There’s no safe place for students or families to just, you know, *be*.

“Watching the kids go out and do everything on their own, and come back with pride and say, ‘I did this,’ and explain everything they’ve done in detail...that’s total success. To know that the kids took ownership of all of it and are so proud to do so.”

— Cheryl Jones-Allie, Founder,
The Village Tutorial

Cheryl: People don’t understand that when you’re out there touching the earth, that it does create some type of call. So whenever we have a farmer that works with the kids, we go outside and just sit. Listen. Kids don’t know how to sit and listen, but neither do adults, so we take that opportunity with something like lavender. I give it to them, they crush and they smell it, and I make them breathe. And we just sit. I just try to get them more involved, so they can use their bodies, their minds, and their senses. They have a total experience.

Wanda: I’m just thinking about the little babies now. We have somewhere safe for them to play. And then just to sit back and just relax. And just take in the scenery. That’s why we have this partnership with you, Trust for Public Land. Thank you.





TPL is the nation's leader in creating safe, healthy, nature-rich schoolyards, not only in community engagement, design, and construction, but also through our broader influence within school districts, state and municipal policies, and federal funding practices. We have created more than 300 community schoolyards across nineteen states, transforming the lives of hundreds of thousands of children, families, teachers, and neighbors. And we are just getting started.

By supporting our work in Atlanta, you are contributing to a nationwide movement to close the outdoor equity gap and build happy, healthier futures for children, families, and communities from coast to coast.

A young boy is the central focus, wearing a black t-shirt with a school logo and the text 'ELEMENTARY' and 'Learning Without Limits'. He is also wearing a black face mask and giving a thumbs-up gesture. He is standing on a red metal playground structure. In the background, there is a clear blue sky, other playground equipment, and a person walking on a gravel path. The overall scene is bright and sunny.

**JOIN THE
COMMUNITY
SCHOOLYARDS
MOVEMENT**



**TRUST FOR
PUBLIC
LAND™**

Connecting everyone to the outdoors.

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