

# green schoolyards

FOR HEALTHY  
COMMUNITIES



## OVERVIEW

What is a park desert? It's a term used to describe a place where there are no public parks available. Surveys show access to an attractive, safe, and nearby park environment, in a neighborhood where people live, can provide respite, recreation, and community spirit. The **SPARK School Park Program** works with schools and neighborhoods to develop community parks on public school grounds. In recent years, it has especially focused on transforming park deserts into nature-rich parks in the greater Houston area. In the past 30 years, SPARK has built over 200 community parks in 17 school districts in Harris County, Texas. Each park is unique. Community members, students, teachers, parents and others all participate in the design process to ensure that the park will truly represent the ideas of community members and the needs of those who live in the surrounding area. While all of the parks are different, a typical park consists of modular playground equipment, a walking trail, benches, picnic tables, trees, an outdoor classroom, and a public art component. One of the most inspiring and compelling requirements of a SPARK Park is that it must be available for public use after the school day has ended (including after-school programs) as well as available on weekends. Schools apply to create a SPARK Park and must demonstrate a plan and capacity to

fundraise for some of its costs, with the rest of the funding provided through the SPARK School Park Program. Parks may re-apply for funding to Re-SPARK after a ten-year period, a remarkable testimony to the longevity, effectiveness and vision underlying this worthwhile program.

## THE WORK

The SPARK School Park Program makes it possible for schools to receive funding to develop community parks on their school grounds. The basic process is this:

- > The principal of the school sends a request on school letterhead to SPARK asking to be considered for selection as a site. The letter includes the number of students, community demographics, and potential business partners for the project. Also included is a brief description of the priorities they propose.
- > In January or February of each year, the SPARK staff makes a site visit to all schools that have applied in the past year to discuss the request with the principal and other interested parties. Site visits by SPARK staff confirm existing relationships between school and community—through churches, businesses, and civic clubs. People from the neighborhood must demonstrate a willingness to help plan and fund the park.

## CASE STUDY: SPARK School Park Program Texas

### MISSION:

SPARK helps public schools develop their playgrounds into community parks.

- > In March, the SPARK Board considers all applications and makes site selections for the coming year.
- > Then in May, the SPARK staff meets with the principals of the selected schools to outline the park construction process. The goal is for parks to be completed within 12–18 months.
- > Once a school is selected, the principal forms a SPARK committee made up of members of civic club members, parents, students, and teachers. They determine what features will be included in their park. Art teachers, coaches, plant operators, and the manager of an adjacent apartment complex are all examples of people that have important roles in the planning and implementation of the design. A landscape architect is assigned for each project. The committee members tour existing SPARK Parks to see the kinds of playground equipment that may be available and how art and landscaping can be integrated into the design.
- > There is room for innovation, and a premium is placed on reflecting the desires of the local community to foster a sense of ownership and care.



## FUNDING

Initial funding for the SPARK School Park Program came through a convergence of need, vision, energy and opportunity. In 1983, the Green Ribbon Committee, a prestigious panel appointed by the Mayor and County Judge to assess Houston's parks, reported that Houston would need at least 5,000 acres of additional park land in order to compare favorably with other U. S. cities. The SPARK program was based on one of the ideas in the final report—that is, to develop neighborhood parks on public school grounds. Eleanor Tinsley, a member of the Houston City Council at that time, was instrumental in founding SPARK in 1983. Early funding to help establish a means by which to award grants to schools to develop community parks was provided by donors such as Exxon, Texaco, Shell and other corporations; private foundations; and individuals. In 1988, another major opportunity was spotted. Funds were going unused from, and

were to be returned to, the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program, a federal program that provides funding for community projects ranging from affordable housing to infrastructure development. Kathleen Ownby saw the opportunity. She was subsequently named Executive Director of SPARK, and has worked tirelessly in that role since 1989. CDBG funds were secured to develop community parks on school grounds in predominantly low-income areas. The CDBG grants ranged from \$300,000 per year to \$800,000 until recent years. In 2016, SPARK was awarded a \$5 million grant from Houston Endowment and the Kinder Foundation to build 30 SPARK parks over the next three years in park desert areas of Houston and Harris County.

## WHO IS SERVED

“Park equity has always been a strong principle underlying SPARK’s work,” says Kathleen Ownby, SPARK’s Executive Director. Ultimately, entire neighborhoods of people of all ages are served by the creation of these community parks on public school property.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The stability, growth, and continuity of the SPARK School Park Program is inspiring to others. SPARK has worked with over 200 schools in 17 school districts, including those being created in park deserts where no parks exist. There are presently 150 active SPARK Parks. All are tangible exemplars of what can be accomplished with vision, commitment, a clear model, belief in people’s capacity to improve their own neighborhoods, and strategic use of funding. Other cities are beginning to work with SPARK to adapt the model. SPARK has allowed, for example, organizations in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and San Antonio, Texas, to use the SPARK name for a small fee to work collaboratively to pilot some similar projects.



See [www.sccs.net/community/bond\\_measuresParcel\\_taxes](http://www.sccs.net/community/bond_measuresParcel_taxes) for information about the tax and [www.sccs.net/schools/district\\_programs-life-lab](http://www.sccs.net/schools/district_programs-life-lab) for additional information about the Life Lab programs at the elementary schools.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- > There should be sweat equity and buy-in from the students and community members, and they should be among those involved in the design of the parks.
- > Each school community is given a goal of raising \$5000 toward the development of their park, in order to qualify for a SPARK Park grant which has ranged from \$10,000 to \$150,000.
- > School leadership changes, so there is a constant need to re-educate principals and teachers that SPARK Parks must provide after school and weekend access to the public.
- > Scale is both a challenge and an opportunity. The Houston Independent School District has 240 schools, so re-education and renewed engagement is a constant process.
- > Plant 15 gallon trees, not saplings.
- > Safety and security is important in these parks, so there needs to be visibility from the street.



*Community involvement and empowerment are what I talk about as our successes. We want every student to be involved and feel as if they have participated, and we want the parents to feel empowered in both fundraising and design.*

—Kathleen Ownby,  
Executive Director,  
SPARK Park School Program