

A group of young children in orange t-shirts are walking on a wooden log structure in a park. The scene is bright and outdoors.

Cities Connecting Children to Nature

NLC NATIONAL
LEAGUE
OF CITIES
CITIES STRONG TOGETHER

Children
& Nature
Network

Making the Case for Green Schoolyards

How cities and school districts can leverage federal & state funds to advance green schoolyards

Table of contents

1. Overview of Toolkit
 - a. Current Funding Landscape
 - i. Allocation of ARPA & ESSER Funds
 - ii. ESSER III Requirements for Stakeholder Engagement
2. Crafting a Message for Engaging Stakeholders
 - a. Organizations to Potentially Engage
 - b. Talking Points for Stakeholder Meetings
 - c. Tips for Engaging Different Stakeholder Groups
3. Collecting Community Input Resources
 - a. Community Forums
 - i. Tips on Hosting Community Forum(s)
 - ii. Sample Email Copy for Inviting Stakeholders
 - iii. Local Media Outreach
4. Resources to Help Make the Case
 - i. Green Schoolyards Advocacy Toolkit
 - ii. Green Schoolyards infographics
 - iii. Other Resources

Overview of Toolkit

We know that federal and state dollars are incredibly valuable to districts and schools to support their current and future plans to address student and staff needs, especially in the pandemic aftermath. The Cities Connecting Children to Nature initiative aims to help city and district leaders, including superintendents, district communications staff, and education partners, make a case for Green Schoolyards in their community. This Toolkit is not intended to support districts in developing their ESSER II and III action plans or grant applications. Instead, you will find high-level information on funding opportunities, talking points to help your team make-the case, sample content and tips for the community input piece of ESSER III, and tips on organizing stakeholder meetings.

This resource is intended to be used by:

- Municipal & city leaders
- School district governing boards
- School district administration
- School leaders
- Community leaders

Current Funding Landscape:

- School districts and cities are seeing increasing funding opportunities due to COVID recovery efforts, including funds from The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funding.
- ARPA funds are given to cities, towns and villages via State and Local Fiscal Recovery.
 - [Guidance from US Treasury for ARPA](#) funds includes:
 - serving the hardest-hit communities and families
 - addressing educational disparities
 - promoting healthy childhood environments
 - It also notes the importance of “investments in parks, public plazas, and other public outdoor recreation spaces” in order to promote “healthier living environments and outdoor recreation and socialization to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.
- [ESSER funds](#) are given by The Department of Education to state education departments. School districts must apply to their states for grants. Here is a list of [state by state plans](#).

- ESSER provides considerable flexibility to school districts for using funds to support learning and recovery during COVID for all students, especially disadvantaged or at-risk students, and their teachers.”
- Specific activities outlined include:
 - Mental health services and supports
 - Activities to address the unique needs of low-income children, students with disabilities, English learners, racial and ethnic minorities, students experiencing homelessness, and foster care youth, including outreach and service delivery
 - Planning and implementing summer learning, supplemental afterschool programs
 - Providing principals and other school leaders with resources to address individual school needs
 - Procedures and coordination systems to improve district preparedness and response efforts to COVID-19

ESSER III Requirements for Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement is a core element of the planning process for the use of ARP ESSER funds. In their planning process, school districts must explain:

- How the funds will be used to implement prevention and mitigation strategies aligned with CDC guidance;
- How the district will use its 20% set-aside to address the academic impact of lost instructional time through evidence-based interventions, such as summer learning or summer enrichment, after school programs, or extended school year programs;
- How the district will ensure that interventions employed will respond to the academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs of all students and particularly those disproportionately impacted such as students from low-income families, students of color, English learners, children w/ disabilities, students experiencing homelessness.
- District must make its ESSER III Use of Funds Plan publicly available on its website within 30 days of receiving its ESSER III grant application approval email.

Crafting a Message for Stakeholders

Starting and supporting a successful green schoolyards program requires many partners representing different areas of expertise. When crafting your message, you should consider which partners are you already working with in your green schoolyards discussions and which partners could or should your group be working with. Below are some examples of key partners or agencies we have seen across the Cities Connecting Children to Nature initiatives. This is not a comprehensive list and some of the groups may not be present in your community. This is intended to be a general resource. You may know of more relevant stakeholders within your specific community.

- School district staff
- Local water agency
- Public works department
- Transportation agency
- Out of school time providers
- City's parks and recreation department
- Community gardening organizations
- High school environmental science clubs
- Civil rights organizations
- Stakeholders representing the interests of: children w/ disabilities, English learners, children experiencing homelessness, children and youth in foster care, migratory students, and justice-involved youth

High-level talking points:

Green space and access to the outdoors is a necessity during COVID-19:

- Last year, school districts were forced to come up with creative solutions outside the school walls for meaningful learning opportunities for students. They had to widen their field of vision to what learning could look like and how [learning can occur outside of the classroom](#).
- COVID-19 showed us how critical regular, safe access to the outdoors is for both mental and physical health, especially for children, who are spending more and more time indoors and in front of screens. Unfortunately, during COVID children have become more [sedentary and gained significant weight](#).
- Research shows that spending time outdoors surrounded by green space makes kids healthier, happier and smarter. And, [experts agree](#) that being outdoors with ample ventilation and more space is safer in regards to the COVID transmission.

- Yet, [The Center for American Progress](#) found that communities of color are three times more likely than white communities to live in “nature-deprived” areas. Unequal access to green spaces was a reality for too many children during COVID.
- All children deserve access to the proven benefits of nature and to spending time safely outdoors, regardless of race, income, or neighborhood. Today more than ever equitable access to outdoor green spaces is not a nice to have, but a must have. It is not only essential for safety in regards to the pandemic but also necessary for mental and physical health.

Green Schoolyards are green infrastructure and community green space:

- Schools are safe community centers that can provide daily access to the benefits of nature for children & communities, especially communities that do not have access to parks and green spaces.
- School districts are often one of the largest landholders in cities. Thus, providing ample opportunities to broaden the city's access to community green spaces.
- As cities look at infrastructure investments, there are many opportunities to advance environmental priorities and also children’s mental, emotional, and academic health through nature connections. Green schoolyards offer the possibility to meet all these priorities.
- Green Schoolyards can become local investments in parks with nature play features which help to reduce urban heat and [support stormwater infrastructure](#).

Green Schoolyards help improve student health and learning:

- A growing body of evidence shows that time spent learning and playing in nature can help children reach their full academic and social-emotional potential. Regular access to high quality green space improves mental and physical health — and inspires strong connections to the natural world.
- Research shows that Green Schoolyards can improve:
 - [Academic achievement](#) through hands-on, experiential learning and by enhancing the cognitive and emotional processes important to learning.
 - [Mental health and well-being](#) and promote social-emotional skill development.
 - [Physical health](#) by encouraging physical activity and offering a variety of active play options that engage children of varying fitness levels, ages, and genders.

Outdoor Education is an important component of safe learning during COVID:

- In general, the [CDC states](#) that COVID-19 is less transmittable in outdoor settings with appropriate precautions. For this reason, outdoor learning has become a viable option for many schools.
- [Outdoor classroom settings](#) help schools continue learning during the pandemic by providing:
 - Additional space for classrooms, outdoor recess and other activities
 - Open space to allow for activities with proper social distancing
 - Learning space with appropriate ventilation to help prevent the spr

Collecting Community Input

School districts that receive Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds are required to develop a plan for how they will use the funds. Specifically for ESSER III funds, school districts must gather community input and explain how it intends to use the funds to address students' academic, social, emotional, and mental health needs, as well as any opportunity gaps that existed before, and were worsened by the pandemic.

Tips on collecting a Community Forum

- Build your list of target stakeholders
- Ensure you are intentionally reaching groups that you want to build a relationship with (Note: ESSER III funds have specific stakeholder requirements)
- Consider engaging the broader community, as relevant for your project.
- Consider the needs of your stakeholders (i.e meeting in person vs. virtually, language needs & support for those with exceptional abilities)
- Consider best dates/times for participants
- Consider if you want participants to receive meeting materials beforehand.
- Consider if you want participants to register. If so, create a registration form and ensure it is broadcast through suitable communication channels.
 - For a specific target audience, we recommend phone calls & emails
 - For broader community engagement consider posting on relevant websites, social media, mass emails & flyer distribution.

Sample email

SUBJECT: You're Invited: Important Conversation about School Funds

BODY:

Dear XX/Community Member,

As we continue to navigate the challenges of COVID-19 and its variants, a broader conversation is emerging. How do we invest in effective programs and practices to keep our children and environment safe?

The challenges posed by the pandemic have widened our field of vision to what our students' days could look like, when and how learning happens, who can contribute valuable lessons, and so much more. We have an enormous opportunity to come back stronger than ever. The federal government allocated emergency funds to schools around the country through the American Rescue Plan.

We are building our plan for how to use those dollars to meet the individual needs of all students, while supporting staff and the community. We want you to be a part of building that plan. Specifically, we are holding (virtual) forum(s) to provide more information and hear directly from you and other members of our community. The details, as well as link to register, is included in the flyer below. You are an important partner in our school community. Your voice and perspective are critical to include in this conversation and the decisions we make. We hope you can join us!

Sincerely,

XX/School Leader

Local media outreach

Local news channels and newspapers play a vital role in both informing and building community. Hyperlocal news outlets, including bloggers, can be sources of critical information that affects residents' quality of life living in the thousands of small and mid-sized communities. These organizations are often eager to pick up neighborhood stories that larger mainstream media outlets tend to leave out. Many Cities Connecting Children to Nature initiatives have been featured in these community newspapers helping build momentum and interest among residents. Here is a [press release template](#) that the Cities Connecting Children to Nature initiative encourages city teams to edit and distribute.

Sample newspaper articles and media outreach on green schoolyards:

St. Louis, Missouri

<https://www.riverfronttimes.com/artsblog/2021/07/21/dutchtown-hosting-two-events-for-st-louisans-on-saturday>

Flagstaff, Arizona

https://azdailysun.com/news/local/education/green-schools-grant-hopes-to-expand-natural-spaces-on-fUSD-campuses/article_fa5da9c1-aa06-594b-8308-cf33169eb11d.html

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

<https://spectrumnews1.com/wi/milwaukee/news/2021/10/13/milwaukee-schools-turn--asphalt-jungle--schoolyards-green>

Additional Resources

- Green Schoolyards [Advocacy Toolkit](#):
 - [Green Schoolyards for Better Health and Learning Slide Deck](#)
 - [Green Schoolyards Benefits Handout](#)

- Green Schoolyards infographics:
 - [Green Schoolyards Academic Outcomes](#)
 - [Green Schoolyards Beneficial Play](#)
 - [Green Schoolyards Physical Activity](#)
 - [Green Schoolyards Mental Health Benefits](#)

- Other resources
 - Initial Guidance on Using ARPA Funds to bring nature's benefits to children. [CCCN resource](#).
 - White House Council on Environmental Quality Chair visits Green Schoolyards in effort to expand access to green spaces. Oct. 7, 2021. [Press Release](#).
 - Research Digest: [Nature access and COVID](#)
 - Why Infrastructure Improvements should include Nature Connections for Children in Cities. [NLC blog](#).
 - The Urgent Case for Green Schoolyards During and After COVID-19. [C&NN Finding Nature News blog by Richard Louv and Sarah Milligan-Toffler](#).