



## *Great Grants and Initiatives*

Grantor: **Gates Family Foundation**

Grantee or Initiative: **Learning Landscapes**

Period of Grant Award: **2003-2008**

### **Background**

The 85 elementary schoolyards in Denver in the late 90's mostly consisted of vast stretches of asphalt and pea gravel, a few pieces of old play equipment and high fences that separated the school from the community. In most cases, the playgrounds in DPS elementary schools could only safely serve a few classes at a time. Recess frequently became the time for fights and injuries, not for exercise, learning or fun. Usually, the poorest neighborhoods had the worst schoolyards.

A new concept developed out of the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado at Denver (UCD). It involved transforming the elementary schoolyards into mini parks that served the school and welcomed the community after hours. Under the leadership of Lois Brink, a landscape professor, using her landscape architectural students, schoolyard designs were created for schools interested in a playground makeover, using graduate students with input from members of each school community. A model project at Bromwell elementary school that was funded by parents caught the attention of the Denver Public School District.

### **The Learning Landscape Alliance**

At this point, with DPS on board, Brink approached the City of Denver and the Gates Family Foundation to consider expanding the concept to other schools, specifically those in the poorest neighborhoods of the city. Four partners – the City of Denver, DPS, UCD and the Gates Family Foundation created the Learning Landscape Alliance that would coordinate the planning, funding and construction necessary to improve 23 school- yards over the next 3-4 years. The design was coordinated by UCD with input from each school; the contracting and construction documents were managed by DPS; with the Gates Family Foundation as the coordinator, all the partners worked on the fundraising; and the school community, parents and students, pitched in to help with construction, e.g. laying down grass, planting trees and shrubs, etc. Each facility has a grass playing field, age-appropriate equipment, a shade structure, extensive plantings of trees and shrubs, an art piece unique to each school, special gardens for flowers and vegetables, and a welcoming gate to the neighborhood.

## **The Model**

Over the next four years, 22 schools in 16 underserved or “Focus” neighborhoods in Denver received new schoolyards at an average cost of \$450,000 per site. \$9 million was raised by the Alliance. Alliance fundraising meetings were held monthly at the Gates Family Foundation office. School fundraisers, businesses, over 12 Colorado foundations, Denver’s major sports teams, public entities such as Great Outdoors Colorado, and many individuals contributed to the initiative. Over 10,000 students, their school community and neighborhood benefitted from Alliance’s efforts.

## **The Public Weighs In: 2003 and 2008 Bond Elections**

In 2002, a Citizens Bond Committee identified learning landscapes the number two desired item for improvement in Denver Public Schools. Subsequently, the 2003 Bond was passed by voters, providing \$10 million more for additional learning landscapes for 25 elementary schools that had applied for new schoolyards. The Alliance funded an evaluation of the learning landscapes, and discovered overwhelming evidence that they improved the school culture because of the various features that encouraged exercise, complemented the curriculum and attracted families after school and over the weekends. After recess, children returned to the classroom ready to learn, not agitated over a schoolyard scuffle. Vandalism was reduced sharply and when it did occur, students or parents identified the responsible party.

Predictably, the 37 elementary schools without learning landscapes continued to press the school district for new schoolyards, and in the 2008 Bond election, Denver voters approved \$29 million more to finish all the DPS schools.

## **The Impact and Continued Momentum**

The program has led to other innovations, including after-school programs in soccer, a gardening group that plants and maintains vegetable gardens that are integrated into school science and nutrition programs. Currently, over 21 public and private partners are involved in some way with learning landscapes. Major national foundations, including Robert Wood Johnson and Kellogg have provided follow-up support for health-related research such as obesity and nutrition. A major grant is pending with the National Institute of Health. Recently, the Learning Landscape program has been installing vegetable gardens in schoolyards across the district.

In the end, the public weighed in with over \$39 million of support to finish what a small public-private partnership started and generated (\$9 million). The beneficiaries include over 40,000 students from 85 elementary schools who use the facilities during and after school, their families and neighbors who protect and have access to the landscapes, and 160 graduate students who helped and were helped by the practical design experience.