

# green schoolyards

FOR HEALTHY  
COMMUNITIES



Photo: Paige Green

## CASE STUDY:

### Education Outside San Francisco, CA

## MISSION:

Education Outside advances science education and environmental literacy by teaching outdoors in public schools. We spark children's interest in science and connect them to the natural world through hands-on learning in school gardens.

## GOAL:

Bring hands-on, experiential science and environmental education to every San Francisco Unified School District elementary school student as a part of the regular school day, throughout the school year.



## OVERVIEW

**Education Outside** grew out of a grassroots coalition known as the San Francisco Green Schoolyard Alliance, founded in 2001. The Alliance formed at an opportune time when conditions in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) were garnering significant community attention. Buildings were arguably beautiful, but old, not always safe, and not necessarily accessible for students who use wheelchairs. A groundswell of support led to efforts to modernize the schools' infrastructure. Committed community leaders made their way to every public hearing and succeeded in integrating green schoolyard design and implementation into what became city bonds that were approved by the voting public. With an extraordinary infusion of funds to include green schoolyards and gardens into re-development, the work began—and continued for many years—to staff and inspire administrators and faculty to use the new green spaces for student learning.

Beginning in 2011, with a name change to Education Outside and support from funders

including the Corporation for National and Community Service (via AmeriCorps), many of those school gardens now have garden educators—people who work to support students and teachers to incorporate science and nature-based learning within the curricula. Education Outside became an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. The program debuted in the SFUSD and now includes other public school districts in the Bay Area. Annually, more than 20,000 public school students in the Bay Area get to experience hands-on science and nature-based learning in school gardens with the guidance of their garden educators.

## THE WORK

**Education Outside** is committed to advancing science in public schools, outdoors. Their approach is to transform school gardens into living outdoor classrooms, where they teach a standards-based curriculum during the school day. They currently engage 55 AmeriCorps members who work full-time at 55 Bay Area public elementary schools to bring nature and science directly into the

hands of more than 20,000 students. There is a new wave of interest in building gardens and green schoolyards in schools. Despite schools' enthusiasm for building learning gardens, however, many lack the staffing or knowledge to fully activate these gardens as living outdoor classrooms. As Education Outside has learned by experience, schools need trained, on-the-ground staff to unlock the educational power of their green schoolyards and to spearhead important school greening efforts—an impossibility for many schools with limited financial resources. The organization developed a program that is designed to overcome this inequity and make high-quality outdoor education available to every public elementary school, and Education Outside has now amassed a wealth of resources that they are proud to share. In San Francisco, they have helped to develop the green schoolyard guidelines for the city's public schools, and they continue to work closely with the school district and especially its director of sustainability to advance the cause.

## FUNDING

Principal funding that set the stage for Education Outside's direct-service work was the result of the work of the San Francisco Green Schoolyard Alliance, which led successful campaigns from 2001 through 2011 that secured nearly \$14 million in city bond funding to design and construct green schoolyards at 84 public schools throughout San Francisco. That original funding created the places and spaces on school grounds where gardens for learning could thrive. It then became clear that teachers needed the support of garden educators to successfully incorporate these nature-based learning environments effectively within their curricula. Critical, very early funding came from Richard Rainwater and REAL School Gardens. As time has passed, there are now local funders; the in-kind and other support from the San Francisco Unified School district and a growing number of other school districts; and, most significantly, federal funding through the AmeriCorps program in the amount of nearly \$1 million a year for three years to support garden educators at each of the school gardens. Additional funding is being provided through the Environmental Protection Agency, a local utility, local city government, state agencies, private foundations, individual donors, and fees for services.

## WHO IS SERVED

K-5 children and youth who participate are those served as the first priority. So too are their teachers, the AmeriCorps volunteers who staff the program, and the broader communities where the participants live. A special focus is on the benefits to young people from low-income, urban communities, and especially children and youth who suffer from trauma in their lives. Stress and the trauma of violence are de-escalated when the children are in the school gardens. They experience a peace and calm not easily available in many of their lives. And yet, all students benefit, as do their teachers.



## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Education Outside and its predecessor organization, the San Francisco Green Schoolyard Alliance, along with the San Francisco Unified School District, have collaboratively created one of the largest green schoolyard systems of any school district in the country. Its initial funding model—incorporating the development of green schoolyards into campaigns for city bonds to support infrastructure renewal—was innovative and effective. It serves as an inspirational model for others to look for opportunities to include greening initiatives within infrastructure development and re-development. Further, its use of a citizen volunteer model, in this case AmeriCorps, brings necessary support to public school teachers, contributes to attracting new teachers to the profession, and benefits the health and well-being of those students who experience the green schoolyards and gardens as part of their education.



Learn more at [educationoutside.org](https://www.educationoutside.org).

## LESSONS LEARNED

- > **Be bold, energetic, persuasive, and ready to build on opportunities.**  
Of all the lessons learned, one most unique and successful is the opportunity that was seized in 2001 to work within the framework of public hearings in order to incorporate green schoolyard enhancements into infrastructure improvement projects that were funded by city bonds.
- > **Harness the power of national service** and bring in federal dollars to support your work on the ground.
- > **Believe in the healing power of garden and nature-based experiences** for people dealing with stress and trauma at school.
- > **Provide at least two years of training** and placement for the service corps volunteers.



Each year, 20,000+ Bay Area public school students experience hands-on science and nature-based learning in school gardens, guided by garden educators.

Trained, on-the-ground staff unlock the educational power of green schoolyards.



*We are working toward a future in which all children—regardless of race, class, or geography—have positive early experiences practicing science and connecting to the natural world. Through our work, future generations will grow up to be scientifically and environmentally literate, therefore equipped to tackle the pressing environmental challenges of our time.*

—Rachel Pringle Frederick,  
Education Outside