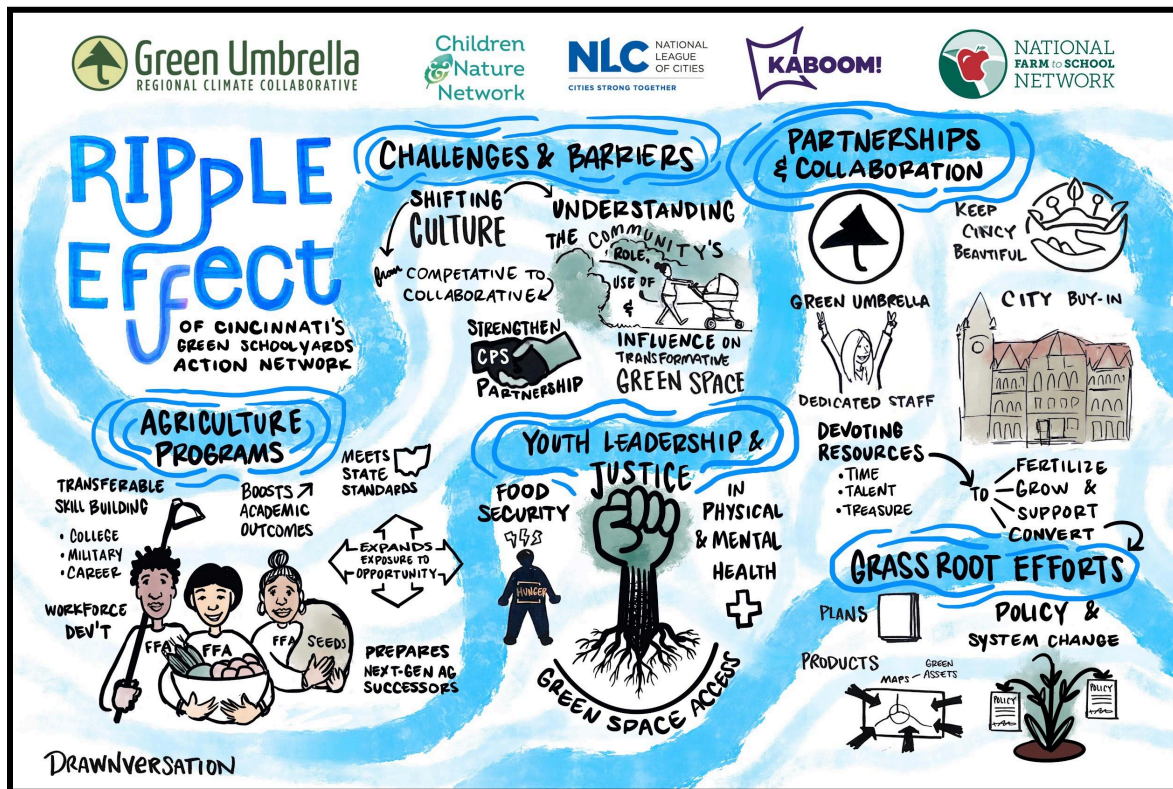


# Ripple Effects of Cincinnati's Green Schoolyards Action Network



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## Appreciations

The successful completion of this Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) report relied on the contributions of several key individuals. Foremost, thank you to the community leaders who shared their experience and insights during the REM session.

We extend our sincere thanks to Cynthia Walters, Director of Green & Healthy Schools at the Green Umbrella Regional Climate Collaborative, for convening the Green Schoolyards Action Network and Strategic Partnership for Greener Schools, hosting us at the beautiful Civic Garden Center of Greater Cincinnati and carefully reviewing our mapping and report. Cynthia's vision and partnership were essential to the success of this collaborative and participatory evaluation process.

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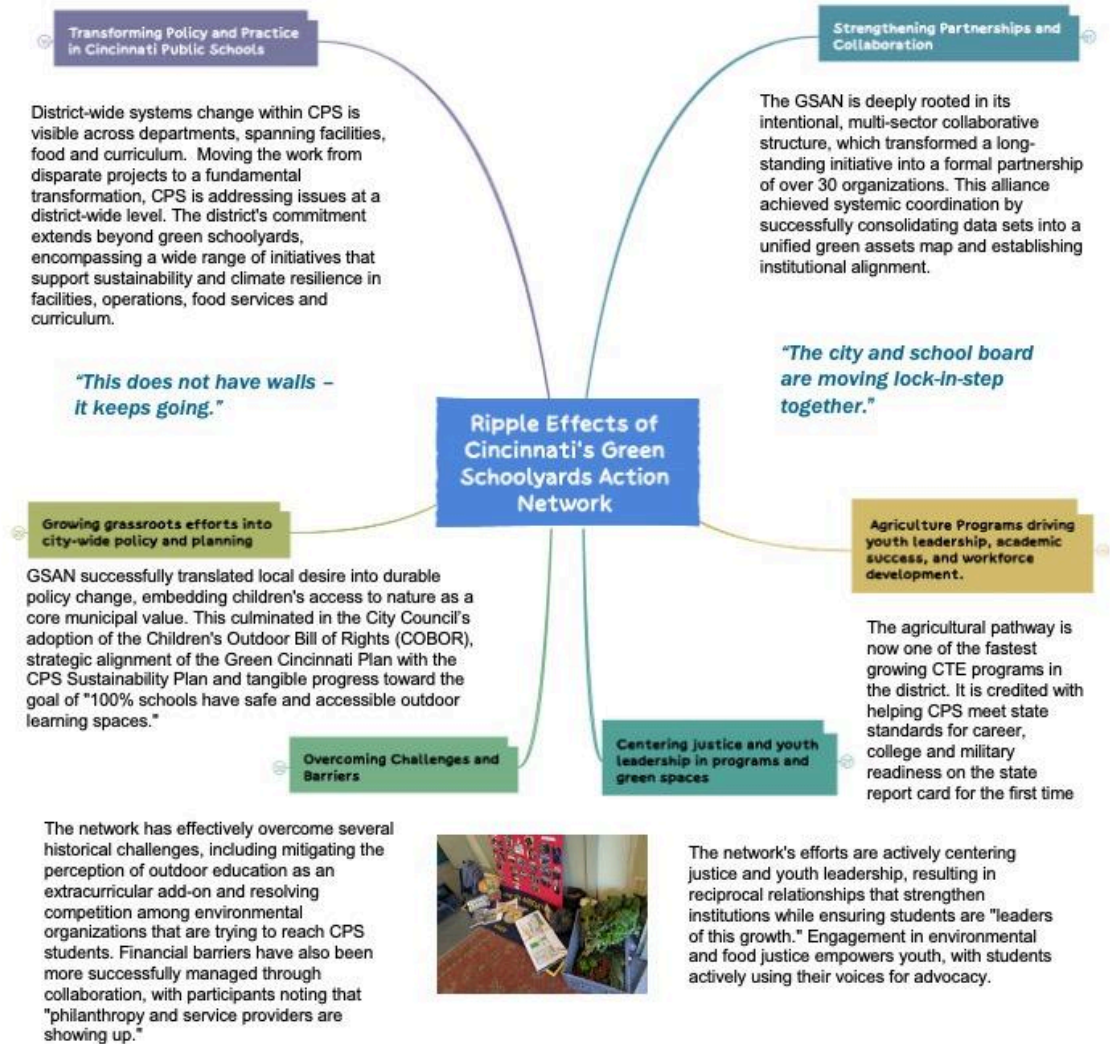
## Table of Contents

<b>Appreciations</b>	
<b>Table of Contents</b>	
<b>Ripple Effects Mapping summary graphic</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>About the Ripple Effects Mapping process</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Findings organized by theme</b>	<b>6</b>
Strengthening partnerships and collaboration	6
Agriculture programs	8
Centering justice and youth leadership	9
Growing grassroots efforts into city-wide policy and planning	11
Transforming policy and practice in Cincinnati Public Schools	13
Overcoming challenges and barriers	14
<b>Summary and key takeaways</b>	<b>15</b>
Reflections from Green & Healthy Schools	17
<b>Appendix A – Sections of the Ripple Effects Map</b>	<b>20</b>

# Ripple Effects Mapping summary graphic

**Ripple Effects of Cincinnati's Green Schoolyard Action Network**

In 2021, the Green Schoolyard Action Network (GSAN) joined the Cities Connecting Children to Nature Green Schoolyards technical assistance cohort. They received technical assistance and seed funding leading to a robust collaboration among Cincinnati Public Schools, the City of Cincinnati and the Green Umbrella Climate Collaborative aimed at bringing more equitable access to nature for school communities across Cincinnati. In September of 2025, GSAN participated in a Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) evaluation process to document and understand the impacts of these efforts. The following themes emerged from the process.



## Background

Green Umbrella Regional Climate Collaboratives' Green Schoolyards Action Network (GSAN) is a robust collaboration that includes the Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS), the City of Cincinnati and the nonprofit sector. The initiative's goal is to provide all CPS campuses with safe, accessible outdoor learning spaces by 2028, maximizing children's access to nature. The network focuses on Green & Healthy Schools, an equity-based framework for facilitating a systematic, district-wide implementation plan with three pillars: green schoolyards, workforce development and wellness policy.

In 2018, the Cincinnati initiative began its systems-change work with the Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN) initiative. GSAN formalized its efforts through participation in the CCCN green schoolyards technical assistance cohort in 2021.<sup>1</sup> Through this initiative, GSAN received strategic planning support, evidence-based resources, access to a peer learning network and seed funding for a GSAN coordinator role at the Green Umbrella Regional Climate Collaborative.<sup>2</sup>

GSAN's primary focus is on green schoolyards. These are nature-filled outdoor spaces that offer students places to play, learn, explore and grow. Designed with and for the school community, these shared outdoor spaces can also be enjoyed by kids, families and neighbors during out-of-school time. Green schoolyards can be designed to meet community needs. They can include outdoor classrooms, native gardens, stormwater capture, traditional playground equipment, nature exploration areas, gardens, trails, trees, water features and more. In Cincinnati, green schoolyards offered a strategic approach for creating more equitable access to nature for children while also advancing sustainable infrastructure and green workforce development.

The steering committee for GSAN, the Strategic Partnership for Green Schools (SPGS), focuses on aligning city, school district and community strategic plans to ensure all CPS students and educators are connected to the benefits of outdoor teaching and learning. With four subcommittees, the SPGS strategically advanced green assets mapping, the district tree program, green workforce development and curriculum development to support green schoolyard initiatives and more. With participation from the City of Cincinnati, Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) and partner organizations, the collaboration overcomes silos and creates action.

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<sup>1</sup> Pallais, A. (2021). Cities take the lead in transforming schoolyards with nature to help kids thrive. <https://www.childrenandnature.org/resources/cities-take-the-lead-in-transforming-schoolyards-with-nature-to-help-kids-thrive/>

<sup>2</sup> Green Umbrella Regional Climate Collaborative <https://greenumrella.org/>

From 2023-2025, GSAN's achievements include:

- **Aligning policy and citywide goals:** The work is grounded in policy support, including the Green Cincinnati Plan<sup>3</sup> and the CPS Wellness Policy, and culminated in the City Council's 2024 adoption of the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights (COBOR),<sup>4</sup> affirming nature access as a right for every child. This alignment is driving substantial action toward achieving the Green Cincinnati Plan goal of ensuring that 100% of public schools have safe, accessible outdoor learning spaces by 2028 and training 4,000 individuals for the city's green workforce.
- **Transforming school grounds through systemic change:** As of 2025, 60 of 66 CPS schools have greenspace, including 20 new green schoolyards, and over \$1 million in funding secured. Network partners are working to complete the remaining six schoolyard renovations through partner resource sharing, ensuring that CPS's 35,000 students have access to greenspace at school by 2028. The network has also scaled its impact beyond site-based projects through master maintenance plans and regional expansion.
- **Building curriculum and workforce pathways:** The initiative goes beyond greenspace installation by integrating K-5 curriculum, developing teacher training modules and expanding green career pathways for students.<sup>5</sup> In 2024, GSAN connected 50 schools to outdoor activities, engaged 10,989 students in nature-based learning, supported 272 educators with professional development and delivered 170 programs to schools via local partners.<sup>6</sup>

During this same timeframe, the CCCN initiative evolved into the Nature Everywhere Communities initiative, a national network launched in 2023 by the Children & Nature Network, National League of Cities and KABOOM!. Nature Everywhere Communities grew to 100, increasing equitable access to nature for children everywhere they live, learn and play.

In 2025, the Nature Everywhere Communities initiative invited GSAN to participate in a Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) evaluation process to strengthen their systems-change approach and their extensive green schoolyards and climate

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<sup>3</sup> Green Cincinnati Plan <https://www.cincinnati-oh.gov/oes/green-cincinnati-plan/>

<sup>4</sup> Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights

<https://greenumbrella.org/cincinnati-passes-childrens-outdoor-bill-of-rights-resolution/>

<sup>5</sup> [Cincinnati Green Workforce Landscape Analysis, K-12 Agricultural Education Career Pathway Framework](#)

<sup>6</sup> Green Schoolyards Action Network <https://greenumbrella.org/green-schoolyards-action-network/>

resilience efforts. Cincinnati was one of five communities across the United States that participated in this evaluation process.

## About the Ripple Effects Mapping process

Ripple Effects Mapping is an evaluation method that engages a range of program participants to retrospectively and visually map the chain of effects resulting from a program or initiative. The REM process combines elements of Appreciative Inquiry,<sup>7</sup> mind mapping, group interviewing and qualitative data analysis.<sup>8</sup>

On October 2, 2025, a group of 24 people from the Green Schoolyard Action Network's (GSAN) member organizations came together for a Ripple Effects Mapping session at Civic Garden Center of Greater Cincinnati.<sup>9</sup> The session was facilitated by Erin Allaman, Director of Learning & Evaluation, and Anne Muller, Program Manager for the Children & Nature Network. At the beginning of the session, participants interviewed each other in groups of two or three using the following Appreciative Inquiry questions:



Image Source: The Children & Nature Network  
CPS Students participate in Appreciative Inquiry Interviews

- Please share a story about one or more highlights or successes that emerged from the Green Schoolyard Action Network and what you think were the key elements of success.
- Please tell me about new or deepened connections with others (individuals, communities, organizations, educational institutions, government, philanthropic) you made as a result of your involvement with Green Schoolyard Action Network? What did these connections lead to?

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<sup>7</sup> Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based organizational development process, increasingly used in evaluation, that involves the art and practice of asking questions that build on the successful, effective and energizing experiences of those involved with a program. For an overview see [https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/appreciative\\_inquiry](https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/appreciative_inquiry).

<sup>8</sup> More information about the Ripple Effects Mapping process can be found at <https://extension.umn.edu/community-development/ripple-effect-mapping>.

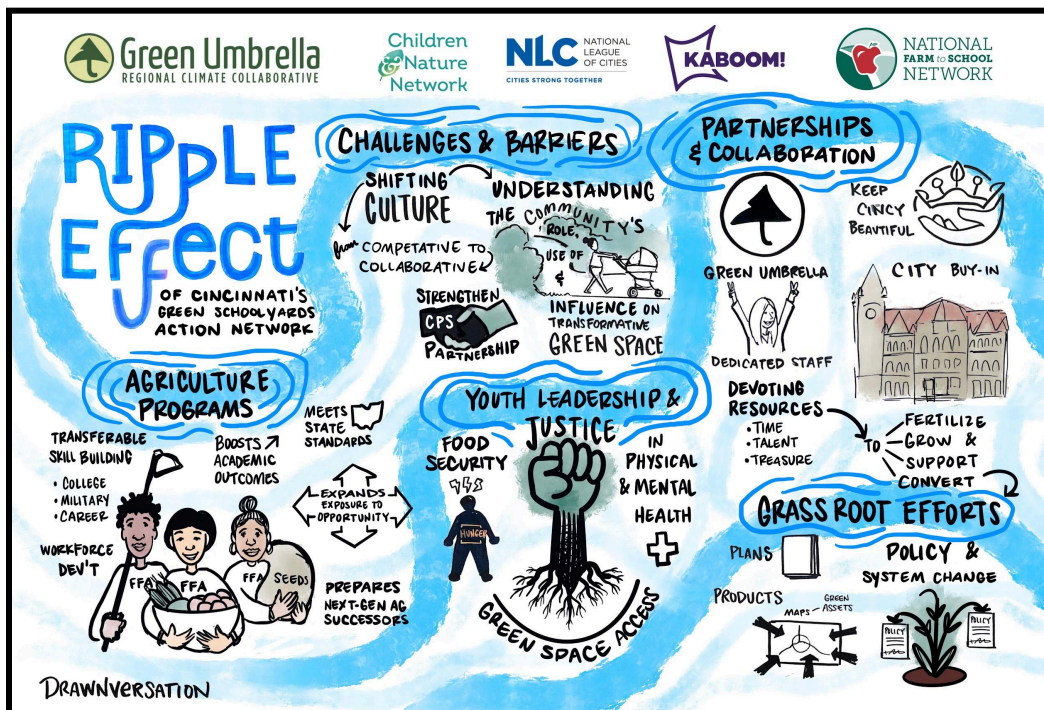
<sup>9</sup> GSAN intentionally invited a balance of core members from CPS, the City of Cincinnati and partner organizations, as well as “peripheral” organizations, students and school staff. One limitation is that parents, additional schools and some organizations were not represented. All network members were invited to submit responses using a digital form. We received one additional response.

- Please share a story about changes in policies, practices, programming, funding, or natural or built spaces that emerged from Green Schoolyard Action Network, and what you think were the key elements of success.
- What unexpected things did you observe in the community that contributed to the success of Green Schoolyard Action Network?

After the interviews, a representative from each group reported the two most important stories they had heard during the interview process, and saved a third story if it had not been reported by other teams.

These reflections were captured using a mind-mapping program, which was projected onto a screen for participants. Participants also wrote their interview responses and emerging ideas on a note-taking sheet, allowing for additional reflections to be added to the map after the session.

In addition to the interactive mind mapping, GSAN invited a local graphic artist, Brandon Black of Drawnversation,<sup>10</sup> to graphically record the REM session. Brandon Black generated this graphic visualization of the ripple effects of Cincinnati's GSAN:



<sup>10</sup> [Drawnversation helps people and businesses communicate without words](#)

During a lunch break, the co-facilitators brainstormed a list of core impact themes that fit the stories reported by participants. After the break, Brandon Black shared the visual story illustrating emerging themes, and the facilitators led a discussion of these core impact themes, editing the theme titles and sometimes moving stories that better fit one theme more than another. During this group reflection process, participants also shared more examples and stories. Finally, participants discussed some of the challenges that had arisen for their coalition. These challenges were added as a core theme.

After the session, all the information from the interview sheets was added. The GSAN coordinator reached out to additional people who were unable to attend the October 2 session, and one more person responded to the Appreciative Inquiry questions in an online survey. Once all data was added, the ripple effects map was reviewed and edited by GSAN's director of Green & Healthy Schools.

The core impact themes emerging from the interview process were:

1. Strengthening partnerships and collaboration
2. Agriculture programs driving youth leadership, academic success and workforce development
3. Centering justice and youth leadership in programs and greenspaces
4. Growing grassroots efforts into city-wide policy and planning
5. Transforming policy and practice in Cincinnati Public Schools
6. Overcoming challenges and barriers

The remainder of this report is organized around these six themes with narrative examples from the ripple effects map. Images of each section of the ripple effects map are in the appendix.

## **Findings organized by theme**

### **Strengthening partnerships and collaboration**

The first theme that emerged was that the success of the Green Schoolyards Action Network (GSAN) is deeply rooted in its intentional, multi-sector collaborative structure. This theme details how the network's shared purpose, grounded in equitable experiences for children, grew into systemic coordination. The initiative began eight years ago as Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) Outside, a collaboration between the school board and park board, and evolved into the formal GSAN in

2023. Participants in the Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) session noted this evolution helped to bring together over 30 partners committed to shared goals, which have been amplified by the Green Cincinnati Plan.

An early outcome of this collaboration was the creation of a unified green assets map, created in collaboration with the University of Cincinnati and CPS. This map combines data on outdoor learning spaces, school gardens, orchards and tree canopy to inform decision-making, help identify gaps and plan for connectivity between schools, parks and recreation centers across the metro area. This commitment to shared data underscores the collective understanding that, “We cannot do this alone.”

In addition, the network is sustained by a deliberate governance structure. REM participants highlighted that Green Umbrella's organizing ensures, “We take action on shared goals and plans,” by setting priorities and establishing ownership. The frequent convenings hosted by GSAN and Strategic Partnership for Green Schools (SPGS) keep stakeholders engaged, leading to the development of new support systems like school wellness training and toolkits.

The collaborative structure has helped the coalition achieve a powerful and fundamental alignment among city institutions. REM attendees reported that the City and school board are moving in “lockstep.” Consistent attendance from CPS board members, administrators and city council members at SPGS meetings demonstrates the deepening of relationships and institutional alignment. For example, the City's green workforce goals aligned with career and technical education (CTE) pathways led to improved green workforce outcomes. The collaborative approach provides a structure where the partners are excited to help solve problems, collectively managing assets and securing funding.

*“The city and school board are moving 'lock-in-step' together.”*

The network also serves as a robust resource generator, attracting unexpected partners — including those focused on Active Living and Nutrition — who are willing to provide money and time to the cause. This commitment, described as deep and authentic, allows the network to leverage specialized skills, solve immediate problems and coordinate shared grant applications. Attendees at the REM session shared a recent example of how strong relationships and ongoing meetings can lead to creative problem-solving, such as a conversation that resulted in resource sharing on something as simple as mulch, yielding significant cost savings for CPS. The coalition has also codeveloped important resources to sustain its efforts, including

the K-12 Agricultural Education Career Pathway Framework and the Local School Wellness Tool Kit.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond institutional impacts, participants shared stories of the work that led to a new job or the launch of a new certificate program at the University of Cincinnati, demonstrating the network's capacity to mentor and strengthen the green economy workforce. The self-organized Green Schoolyards Summit in 2024, which attracted over 200 attendees, was cited as a powerful example of the “mass capacity of people who are willing to support this work” and ensure it continues to move forward.

### **Agriculture programs are driving youth leadership, academic success and workforce development**

Another robust theme that emerged from the REM session concerned the dynamic, hands-on agricultural programming that grew directly out of the strategic network alignment. In CPS, agriculture programs serve as a powerful catalyst for youth leadership, academic success and career preparation. The SPGS found a clear overlap between school district and city goals, which helped formalize the vision for green workforce development and career and technical education (CTE) pathways. The deliberate investments made by the SPGS partnership — in both the local economy and environmental sustainability — ensure future outcomes for student health and career possibilities.

The Aiken Farm serves as a successful model for urban agriculture and work-based learning within the district. Educators and students from the Aiken Farm and Future Farmers of America (FFA) program offered direct, compelling insights into the program's success during the REM session. Although other programs were not represented at the REM session, Aiken serves as a compelling example of the commitment to and momentum of CPS's agriculture programs. Attendees noted that agriculture is one of the fastest-growing CTE pathways in the district, competing with the health pathway.

REM session participants highlighted that the agriculture program has been central to changing the “self-fulfilling prophecy” for students: By providing a visible, successful, high-skill pathway that non-agricultural students see every day, the program helps overcome the cycle in which low expectations and limited exposure restrict perceived career paths. Educators and students explained that this approach increases equity by directing programs to the kids who will benefit the most.

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<sup>11</sup> Local School Wellness Policy Toolkit  
<https://greenumblella.org/wp-content/uploads/Local-School-Wellness-Policy-Toolkit.pdf>

Students are actively involved in valuable green workplace learning opportunities, including planting trees to improve air quality, testing water quality, removing invasive species and managing the Aiken Farm. These opportunities include earning money; participating in community programs, like La Soupe, an organization that helps reduce food waste; and participating in work-travel experiences, like a trip to the Grand Tetons & Yellowstone with the Green Team.

This integration of hands-on learning and career preparation has resulted in measurable academic success. Multiple REM session participants credited the agricultural pathway with helping CPS meet state report card standards for career, college and military readiness for the first time.

*“The agriculture pathway is credited with helping CPS meet state standards for career, college and military readiness on the state report card for the first time.”*

The agriculture programs are driving changes in food access in CPS and beyond through their connection to the Cincinnati Public Schools Food Services Program. One major policy change is the adoption of Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) so that the schools can become a “farm-to-school supplier of food to the students at our schools, with our students being the farmers of the food.” This initiative involves direct support from the CPS food services team, which, together with Green Umbrella, provides Aiken with GAP training. Students are applying their skills directly: For example, at Clark and Gamble High Schools, students are raising chickens — eggs are then used in the Dater culinary program. This showcases a direct benefit of the partnership's focus on connecting youth with green skills and local food systems.

### **Centering justice and youth leadership in programs and greenspaces**

The commitment to creating equitable outcomes is further demonstrated by this theme, which highlights how the network's efforts are actively centering justice and youth leadership in programming and the design of greenspaces. This reflects the deep, reciprocal relationships forged between the GSAN partners, students and the wider community, as well as how student leadership and localized agricultural programming are shaping conversations around environmental justice and community health. Participants emphasized that “urban agriculture and outdoor learning have been embraced by a community of students and families who have otherwise not had easy access to natural experiences.” This momentum is amplified by the unexpected interest among young people not only in doing this work but also in leading it. REM session attendees emphasized that the green schoolyards efforts

are “not happening in a vacuum,” but are rooted in Cincinnati’s existing culture of sustainability and appreciation for nature.

The reciprocal partnerships are leading to increased community health and engagement. This is evident at the Aiken Farm, which has undergone upgrades, including the addition of new structures, solar power, high tunnel greenhouses and the introduction of animals. The farm gives back to the community through food and mental health support. REM session participants noted that they “did not expect to see as many community members as we do, who visit and use our Aiken Garden for food, animal interactions and to hike through our prairie and woods.” Through their participation, students and partners are directly addressing environmental justice and community health, demonstrating how school greenspaces also benefit the wider community.



Produce grown by CPS students  
Image Credit: The Children & Nature Network

Visual artist Brandon Black highlighted this subtle yet important theme: that environmental and community justice are crucial to the GSAN's efforts. As students shared their experiences, it was evident that the programming was rooted in addressing historic injustices in Cincinnati. For instance, collaborating with organizations like La Soupe teaches students and community members how to use surplus food from grocery stores — and gets it to people who need it. Similarly, the partnership with Cancer Justice promotes health by having staff visit schools and teach people how to take care of themselves and prevent illness. The organization also provides access to vaccinations for those who cannot easily obtain them. These programs reinforce the belief that “you can’t have good environmental health if you’re not healthy.”

The growth and sustainability of the green schoolyard movement are intrinsically linked to the empowerment of those most impacted: students. Many students are actively using the network for advocacy. For example, students involved in the agriculture career tech pathway often go above and beyond the class, school and leadership expectations. The partnership has established direct channels for student advocacy, supporting them when they face broader issues, like past discussions about defunding at CPS, and when students used their voice to bring “an electrification policy before the school board — and it passed.”

This direct engagement creates powerful feedback loops. When partners like the Cincinnati Tree Planning team first came into schools, they had to get to know the students: Who they are and what's happening in their lives. They were surprised to discover how much the kids knew: "They were teaching us. They knew photosynthesis, trees and buds information. They were ready to dig!" For GSAN partners, this experience reinforced the need to understand the audience before relaying the importance of the work.

*"Our community partnerships are now reciprocal in that we benefit each other by making our institutions stronger while having our students be leaders of this growth."*

Finally, the commitment to listening to community needs is expanding the ripple effects to new partners, helping to dismantle historical barriers and broaden the initiative's reach. The growing interest from students, parents and administrators ensures that a wider audience has access to programs and greenspaces. Participants noted that having City officials, staff and police present, listening to community needs and focusing on what can be done together helps remove barriers.

The positive momentum has led to local media coverage highlighting the initiative's success, including the engagement of minorities in climate work and student excitement around the Aiken High School agricultural program. The existing engagement is making investments in future outcomes for students' health, academic and career possibilities, yielding both long-term and immediate benefits.

### **Growing grassroots efforts into city-wide policy and planning**

The collaborative efforts successfully translated local impact and community desire into durable systems change across Cincinnati. The work moved beyond individual projects to establish policies, funding streams and infrastructure that embed children's access to nature as a core municipal value. Participants noted that this effort is fundamentally about affirming the city's values and harnessing the community's desire to get kids outside. This momentum, fueled by cross-sector alignment, led to significant city-level policy changes, including the integration of the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights (COBOR), a "wonderful affirmation of the city that they are not going to compromise on children's access to nature."

REM session participants credited the alignment of strategic plans across organizations with creating momentum and growth in the partnership by embedding goals at the institutional level. REM participants highlighted that a key change is the successful integration of the CPS Sustainability Plan with the Green Cincinnati Plan. This coordination is anchored by a sustained collaborative effort with the CPS district

chief operating officer, who indicated in the REM session that improving outdoor learning campuses is one of his top three goals. This leadership commitment is evident in outcomes like the tree mapping program, district-wide procedures and a horticulture training program for building engineers.



Adoption of Cincinnati's Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights  
Image Source: Green Umbrella Regional Climate Collaborative

The Cincinnati Health Department linked its Community Health Improvement Plan to the partnership, leading to the development of a curriculum focused on nutrition and active living programs. The successful installation of the Traffic Garden at Roll Hill School, a simulated intersection used to teach bike safety and active living, was a direct result of hearing all voices, thereby strengthening the connection between the school district and the city health department.

Strategic policy alignment has led to the development of tangible green infrastructure that benefits schools, children and the community at large. The partnership has successfully leveraged existing city assets and funding sources, achieving unexpected success. REM session participants shared that "Nati is so well resourced, we can now bring these dollars to bear on this work." Despite funding shortfalls, participants reported that gardens and other outdoor programs continue to take place, a testament to the collaboration — "people and orgs continue to step up." This commitment is realizing the expansive goal set by the Green Cincinnati Plan that 100% of schools have safe and accessible outdoor learning spaces. According to participants, "As of 2025, 60 of the 66 CPS schools have greenspace, with SPGS working to complete the remaining six through partner resource sharing."

The alignment across city departments has rippled into additional infrastructure projects, allowing additional partners to engage with the community and align their projects with the broader initiative. Attendees explained that now, when new partners want to support similar projects, it is clear who they should contact and how they can support the existing plans. Participants shared their excitement about how the partnership is helping to build relationships with new community organizations and inspiring projects. Projects like the Clark High School green roof installation and the Reds Community Fund's 2025 Community Makeover in Walnut Hills, which created the Urban Learning Garden and rebuilt greenspace at Frederick Douglass Elementary, further demonstrate how policy alignment directs resources to transform campuses into shared green assets for the entire community.

## Transforming policy and practice in Cincinnati Public Schools

Involvement in the GSAN and SPGS rippled into institutional changes within the school district. CPS has transitioned from green schoolyards, workforce pathways, sustainability and health and wellness existing as a collection of disparate projects to a unified approach to district-wide systems change. This transformation, closely related to the policy successes in the previous theme, ensures that sustainability is now integrated into the district's core operations and academic outcomes, transcending a scattered school-by-school approach.

This transformational change is now visible across departments as CPS addresses issues at the district level — spanning facilities, food, and curriculum. REM session participants highlighted that this system-wide change demonstrates “internal depth” and stronger connections between school leadership and district leadership, including the board, superintendent and facilities. The district's commitment is articulated in its draft strategic plan, which acts as a flexible guide. Participants noted that the work is not confined to green schoolyards but extends to many aspects of financial sustainability and operations. This expansion has led to changes in purchasing policies, including the planned acquisition of 40 electric buses and the installation of updated lighting. “Sustainability is now integrated into all aspects of school operations.”

*“This does not have walls - it keeps going.”*

A key policy change that demonstrates this operational shift is the push to implement Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), enabling school farms to become “farm-to-school suppliers of food” and shifting food policy and procurement. This has created a reciprocal relationship in both funding and learning, with opportunities to expand efforts at the state level. The Cincinnati Public Schools Food Services Program is leading this effort: a grant supporting Aiken's pursuit of GAP certification enables the school district to micro-purchase food, strengthening its connection as a local food producer. Other schools are replicating this model, allowing CPS Dining Services to source 20–24% of its food locally.

This shift is supported by administrative-level support that keeps the practice of local sourcing viable. REM session participants view this work as a model for the regional and state initiatives. The Ohio State University has been “very impressed by how our schools are setting up school farms,” which has led to work opportunities for students. This has also built alignment between local efforts and the Ohio Department of Agriculture's Ohio Proud program.

## Overcoming challenges and barriers

Towards the end of the Ripple Effects Mapping session, the facilitators asked participants to describe some of the challenges they have faced in their participation. Participants noted several interconnected challenges that organizations face when incorporating green schoolyards into the district. One broad theme was the financial instability inherent in grant-funded work, while concerns about “sustaining deep collaboration with a large institution like CPS” also arose.

A persistent challenge for some organizations is navigating limited funding and the cycle of grant funding and applications. Participants noted that current changes in federal funding are “sudden and disruptive,” often impacting the sustainability of projects. The loss of federal funding, in particular, necessitates collaboration to support CPS's strategic plan for outdoor learning spaces. This has required the partnership to leverage existing resources and use grants to support smaller projects.

*“Through the partnership, philanthropy, and service providers are showing up. We are well-resourced, and there is money available.”*

Despite these limits, the partnership has proven successful in overcoming financial barriers. For example, students shared how they are sometimes willing to “pitch in to do this work for free” when the school district lacks funds for their projects. Another group shared how the SPGS subcommittees have found cost savings through collaboration. Furthermore, being “at the table with others” has resolved previous barriers in understanding potential resources. “Through the partnership, philanthropy and service providers are showing up. We are well-resourced, and there is money available.” Another example is the Traffic Garden grant: The partnership helped facilitate contract and procurement processes, demonstrating that a collaborative group of stakeholders from multiple organizations can overcome barriers. The goal now is to “take current resources and figure out how to plug into a larger goal” that feels sustainable.

Strengthening the partnership with CPS is an ongoing area of focus. Previously, the high rate of CPS leadership transitions — four superintendents in five years — posed a significant challenge. Though relationships are now more solid, major changes and reorganization within CPS can still impact initiatives, requiring partners to be “understanding to accommodate and make it successful.” An important shift in ensuring the long-term success of green schoolyard projects is a new understanding that all projects must include maintenance plans and budgets so “they are not an expensive burden for CPS.”

An important challenge that has been overcome is the perception of outdoor education. Previously, the idea was that it was an extracurricular add-on. This has shifted as the agricultural program is “leading the way for academic success.” Similarly, the partnership helped overcome a sense of competition between organizations that provide environmental education for CPS students; now, partners can look at shared plans and identify the organizations that can best meet students’ needs.

An ongoing challenge is the lack of a systemic approach to whole child wellness — and the sheer scale of the issues at hand, particularly climate change and the mental and emotional health of young people. While the partnership is a necessity because of the shared understanding that “we cannot do this alone,” participants said the number of ideas and initiatives can be overwhelming to keep up with.

Partners also emphasized the continued importance of building a shared understanding across all levels and overcoming historical barriers between city government and community members. Using language like “I understand, I empathize, let’s fix it” creates a roundtable of “boots on the ground” and cultivates true community relationships. However, the lack of involvement from some city stakeholders in understanding complex barriers remains a challenge. To combat this, engagement is key. Looking to the future, the GSAN partnership recognizes the need to continue increasing community education and awareness of CPS progress and the benefits of nature.

## Summary and key takeaways

This Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) evaluation documented the extensive community, organizational and personal impacts of Cincinnati Green Schoolyards Action Network (GSAN), a robust collaboration aligning the Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS), the City of Cincinnati and the nonprofit sector. The network’s core goal is to provide all CPS campuses with safe, accessible outdoor learning spaces by 2028, maximizing the benefits of nature access for children through coordinated curriculum development, professional training and sustainable infrastructure planning.

The ripple effects map was developed in collaboration with 25 GSAN members on October 2, 2025. Six core impact themes emerged, demonstrating how the partnership is creating system-wide change in Cincinnati. The paragraphs below summarize the key findings related to these themes.

**Strengthening partnerships and collaboration:** The success of GSAN is deeply rooted in its intentional, multi-sector collaborative structure, which transformed early

collaboration into a formal partnership of over 30 organizations. This alliance achieved systemic coordination by successfully consolidating data sets into a unified green assets map and establishing institutional alignment where the "City and school board are moving lock-in-step together." This coordination creates tangible ripples, leading to the formalization of the K-12 agriculture education career pathway framework and other green workforce outcomes. The GSAN leverages its network partners' expertise to create valuable resources. The alignment of strategic plans, a high level of commitment from key partners and subsequent positive momentum attract new partners, help the network secure and distribute funding, and solve immediate logistical problems.

**Agriculture programs are driving youth leadership, academic success and workforce development:** The hands-on agriculture programs, exemplified by the Aiken Farm, have become a powerful catalyst for youth success and workforce development, stemming directly from GSAN's strategic alignment. The agriculture pathway is now one of the fastest-growing CTE programs in the district, credited with helping CPS meet state standards for career, college and military readiness on the state report card for the first time. This success is driven by providing students with visible, high-skill workplace learning opportunities — from planting trees to managing the farm — that expand career pathways. The program is also part of a larger policy change aimed at implementing Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), enabling school farms to become "farm to school suppliers of food" for the district and resulting in direct benefits for food systems and workforce training.

**Centering justice and youth leadership in programs and greenspaces:** The network's efforts actively center justice and youth leadership, fostering reciprocal relationships that strengthen institutions while ensuring students are "leaders of this growth." Urban agriculture and outdoor learning are more fully embraced by communities that previously lacked easy access to nature. This work directly addresses environmental justice and community health, as demonstrated by partnerships with organizations like La Soupe and Cancer Justice, which reinforce the interconnectedness of community and environmental health. This engagement empowers youth, encouraging students to actively use their voices for advocacy.

**Growing grassroots efforts into city-wide policy and planning:** The collaborative efforts of GSAN and its partners successfully translated local desire into durable policy change, embedding children's access to nature as a core municipal value. This culminated in the city council's adoption of the Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights (COBOR). The strategic alignment of the Green Cincinnati Plan with the CPS Sustainability Plan created the institutional framework necessary to secure funding

and develop green infrastructure, resulting in tangible progress toward the goal of "100% schools have safe and accessible outdoor learning spaces."

**Transforming policy and practice in Cincinnati Public Schools:** District-wide systems change within CPS is visible across departments, spanning facilities, food and curriculum. Moving the work from disparate projects to a fundamental transformation, CPS is addressing issues at a district-wide level, and the school board and departmental leaders are driving that change. The district's commitment extends beyond green schoolyards, encompassing a wide range of initiatives that support sustainability and climate resilience in facilities, operations, food services and curriculum.

**Overcoming challenges and barriers:** This final theme addresses the complex barriers faced by the partnership and how they are overcoming many of their challenges through collaboration. The network has effectively overcome several historical challenges, including mitigating the perception of outdoor education as an extracurricular add-on and resolving competition among environmental organizations seeking to reach CPS students. Financial barriers have also been more successfully managed through collaboration, with participants noting that "philanthropy and service providers are showing up." However, the network still faces ongoing challenges: financial instability due to grant funding cycles and shifts in federal funding; sustaining deep institutional collaboration through leadership transitions; and the persistent, large-scale issues of climate change and the mental and emotional health of young people.

In summary, GSAN successfully focused on green schoolyard infrastructure and had ripple effects far beyond this initial scope. The network successfully leveraged its robust cross-sector partnership to drive transformational systems change across CPS and the City of Cincinnati, resulting in measurable successes in youth workforce development, academic outcomes, policy integration and the creation of a durable, replicable model for other urban school districts and regional partners to increase community health and climate resiliency.

### **Reflections from Green Umbrella's director of Green & Healthy Schools**

Strategic Partnership for Greener Schools (SPGS) is leading the way to ensure all CPS students have equitable access to experiential outdoor learning. It is actively working to achieve whole-district sustainability by embedding systems for expanding and maintaining greenspace. SPGS employs a subcommittee structure that is dedicated to mapping green assets, expanding agricultural pathways and integrating

relevant professional development and curricula. Additionally, there is connectivity between GSAN and the CPS Wellness Policy Committee with the purpose to establish accountability and sustain green initiatives through district-wide policies.

The federal policy and funding landscape is rapidly changing, disrupting the progress being made in connecting students to nature through outdoor teaching and learning. However, by operating under the premise that local communities hold the power and that systems change through collective impact, our strong network of partners and strategic planning have prepared us to move forward without disruption. By embedding whole district systems for transforming greenspace and customizing existing frameworks, such as CTE career pathways and local school wellness policy frameworks, GSAN is well positioned and dedicated to supporting school communities.

GSAN is extremely grateful to Children & Nature Network, The National League of Cities and KABOOM! for convening members of the SPGS to realize the successes and collective impact being accomplished by city members, school district staff and students, community members and partner organizations. By mapping the key elements of impact, we can determine areas of strength and gaps, as well as what needs to be further developed.

Through the Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) process, measurable outcomes emerged that were previously hidden, including new positions, more funding opportunities, increased academic performance and work-based learning, and additional agriculture and environmental education teaching and learning courses at the K-12 and college level. Equipped with these indicators, GSAN can equitably and strategically secure funding and fuel action for whole-school district transformation. The role of a school district sustainability manager becomes increasingly essential and should be prioritized as we move forward with connecting the aspects of Green & Healthy Schools between the facilities, curriculum, CTE and foodservice departments. Data collection and management surfaced as an effort that needs to be addressed to accurately record the number of participating schools, students, educators and partners and to represent broad changes occurring in education and environmental systems in the City of Cincinnati.

The REM process further solidified the connectedness of communities and partner organizations in the City of Cincinnati. Even though elected officials and school leadership are constantly changing, employing city champions and district leaders, who embed systems and policies, is essential to the longevity of green schoolyards. None of this work would be possible without the foundation set by the Green Cincinnati Plan, Green Umbrella's Executive Director Ryan Mooney-Bullock,

passionate CPS leaders like Aaron Parker, Christopher Burkhardt, Michel Turner and many others who are instrumental in mitigating climate change through environmentally-minded practices and school community wellness.

Student participation in the REM process illustrates why it is crucial to include them in the decision-making process when planning, designing and implementing green schoolyards. Policy-making at the school district level and projects should be increasingly student-driven, and student input should be thoughtfully integrated into learning standards and course requirements. When students lead green projects, they not only gain skills but also deepen their connection to place, developing a sense of belonging, stewardship and environmental justice. Their voices and creativity are crucial in shaping a more sustainable, equitable future.

GSAN and Green & Healthy Schools will continue to grow our regional leadership. In June 2024, Green Umbrella hosted over 200 attendees from school districts, municipalities, and organizations across the Greater Cincinnati region at the Green Schoolyards Summit. We will continue to grow our leadership regionally by bringing together leaders and developing resources. The Green & Healthy Schools guidebook will be released in March 2026. Planning is underway for the Green & Healthy Schools Symposium in June 2026, which will feature students who are leading climate-related action. The Green & Healthy Schools guidebook and symposium will set the stage and provide frameworks for working with additional school districts, municipalities and partner organizations across the tri-state region.

Cynthia Walters, Director of Green & Healthy Schools, Green Umbrella Regional Climate Collaborative

# Appendix A – Sections of the Ripple Effects Map

## Strengthening partnerships and collaboration

<p>A success was getting the first map created. Through partnerships we got all data sets in one repository.</p>		<p>Map shows outdoor learning, school gardens, orchards, and tree canopy to identify gaps and decision making for hubs to host agricultural programs. Developed in partnership with the University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati Public Schools.</p>	<p>Now using maps of the region to support trail connectivity opportunities to build connectivity between schools, parks, and recreation centers.</p>
<p>Shared understanding that we cannot do this alone- there is so much to be done to accomplish this goal and necessity of partnerships</p>		<p>First map of green assets has been created by assets that have been created by multiple orgs. All these data sets have been combined into one map of metro area</p> <p>The build out of outdoor education and a green sustainability despite financial crisis.</p> <p>Multigenerational interest and growing interest in agriculture with students. The motivations differ. Outdoor learning linked to: Active Living, Making Schools Better, nutrition, outdoors and mental health, broader career development, science curriculum, farming and food production, student learning outcomes</p>	
<p>a. Eight years ago this began as a collaboration between the school board and park board as CFS Outside. It evolved in 2023 and became the Green Schoolyards Action Network. The Strategic Partnership for Green Schools is the steering committee by Green Umbrella and championed by Keep Cincinnati Beautiful and Councilperson Meeka Owen. This work was amplified by the Green Cincinnati Plan with 30 partners who started collaborating on curriculum, mapping, resolving turf.</p>	<p>Green Umbrella's partnership organizing makes sure that we take action on shared goals and plans by asking "who is owning this and ensuring it is a priority?"</p> <p>Our structure includes micro-committees that can focus on specific goals and challenges.</p> <p>Convenings hosted by GSAN/SPGS makes sure that stakeholders keep coming together to make sure that we know what schools need support, funding, teacher training, etc.</p>	<p>The Children &amp; Nature Network and Cincinnati Public Schools are an example of partnerships leveraging additional partnerships. Through these partnerships, we were inspired to do this for the national Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights and the Green Netwe Plan Connections.</p> <p>The partnership brings together City parks, CPS, Groundwork, Common Orchard Project, Civic Garden. Together we can leverage people's skills and organizations are willing to give to the partnership.</p> <p>Collective partnerships are making sure that policies, which provide financial support, are put into action</p> <p>Together, we have a tool bank, and others can help connect the dots and make connections to grant funding</p> <p>An example of this is a 20-minute conversation on mulch led to contributing an odd expertise, solutions, and skills.</p> <p>Green Schoolyards Summit June 2024 had over 200 folks attending. It was self-organized and showed the mass capacity of people who are willing to support this work example of how many people are involved and this is still moving forward</p>	<p>The partnerships create deeper connections among many partners.</p>
<p>GSAN/SPGS is a resource generator.</p>		<p>School wellness trainings and toolkits are new and emerged out of the need for more training and support. This will happen through health agencies. This will also be addressed in the Green and Healthy Schools Summit in 2026.</p> <p>Resources include maintenance manuals, agricultural pathway frameworks, and training materials.</p> <p>GSAN resulted in an expansion of partner programming and increased local funding based on meeting specific education goals of the Green Cincinnati Plan</p>	<p>Resource creation to embed structures for district-wide green schoolyards. Workforce development and wellness includes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-CPS Sustainable School Grounds</li> <li>-Outdoor Learning Guide/Curriculum Guide</li> <li>-K-12 Ag Ed Career Pathway Framework</li> <li>-School Assets Mapping</li> <li>-Local School Wellness Tool Kit</li> </ul>
<p>Leads to improved and increased funding for related goals</p>		<p>Guides organizations to be more strategic in how they go about projects and grants.</p> <p>Deepened partnerships and connected organizations allowed partner organizations to expand their scope even with canceled funding</p> <p>Through the city's Green Cincinnati Plan, we have mutual quarterly meetings to navigate things like youth employment, deepen relationships between the City and CPS, Brimble School brought back into CPS to be a Montessori Lab School, CPS aiming to be a Montessori leader and environmental values are deeply embedded.</p>	<p>The Reds Foundation involvement in the Walnut Hills project deepened our connection with the Cincinnati Zoo, Keep Cincinnati Beautiful, the Urban Farming Initiative and other Walnut Hills-based civic organizations.</p> <p>Using and making existing frameworks (such as CTE, district wellness policy, GC7) more robust and applicable ensures implementation and sustainability of meeting the needs of school communities and surrounding neighborhoods. No additional funding for new initiatives is needed.</p> <p>The Green Cincinnati Plan states a goal of "100% schools have safe and accessible outdoor learning spaces." As of 2025, 40 schools have to a safe outdoor learning space-SPGS is working to complete the remaining 6 through partner resource sharing.</p>

Strengthening partnerships and collaboration

# Strengthening partnerships and collaboration cont.

## Strengthening partnerships and collaboration

b. The Partnership resulted in stronger alignment between the City and School district. The City and School board are moving "lock-in-step" together. We are aligned in this work, particularly from a workforce development perspective.

CPS Board Members, CPS administrators, city council members are in attendance. This is proof of the consistent work of Green Umbrella convening this group regularly to deepen relationships and partnerships.

Through the strategic partnership, there is overlap between the career and education (CTE) work and the partnership. We can now see workforce pathways more clearly. We can leverage the partnership as a resource and there is momentum in this space.

A group that has been brought together through a network and structures of partners. We are at the table with CPS needs, figuring out how to make things happen as a WE - the district needs partners. The partners are excited to help solve problems. We are approaching this from 1. "What can we do today" and 2. "What can we plan for." Together we can figure out how to manage and grow assets, fund sustainability and also nature. Great group that brought together a subset of partners.

Workforce outcomes were unexpected and resulted from the recognition of the City goal for a green workforce; district doing CTE green workforce pathway; big picture opportunities at a district wide level; and economic opportunity for them and the city.

We're always asking "Who should be at the table?" There are often unexpected partners. May be surprised why the health department is. Can relate other topics to outdoor learning. Starting to branch out and look at different partners that could be connected to outdoor learning.

Through the City's Green Cincinnati plan, we have through quarterly meetings to navigate things like youth employment, deepen relationships between the City and CPS. Bramble School brought back into CPS to be a Montessori Lab School. CPS aiming to be a Montessori leader and environmental values are deeply embedded.

Outdoor learning spaces. For an example, we schools have to a safe outdoor learning space-SPGS is working to complete the remaining 6 through partner resource sharing.

c. Partners, sometimes unexpected, are willing to come together to give money, time, and skills for the cause. The partnerships bring resources to the table and result in solutions.

Building on existing strengths in Cincinnati's way of being and doing to create transformative and lasting change

Active living: relating outdoor learning to physical activity and active play in additional other benefits led to unexpected partnerships

"The Why" of improving environmental quality, resilience, and an environmental ethic.

A highlight is that so many groups are so committed to sustainability and that the collaborative spirit is so strong.

Extensive amount of green space in our urban environment-even in most distressed neighborhoods. A natural asset we can continue to link to.

Not happening in a vacuum: interest from young people in this work and to take leadership in it. We already had fertile fields and there has always been a commitment to being outdoors. It's part of the culture in this town.

Involvement led to a new job! I was previously supporting GSAN and this led to a new opportunity to engage civically with the Nature Center and the Civic Garden Center. I was also able to launch a new certificate at University of Cincinnati

The partnership brings together key partners. The right people are in the room leading to stronger connections.

This has led to mentoring in high schools.

CPS Food Services is working with Green Umbrella, 1-2x/month through the partnership. They are supporting the Aiken GAP trainings and students going above and beyond in these workforce opportunities.

Timing and level of engagement is key. For grants: start early, identify all the stakeholders, and also getting to know the audience you are working with. We were surprised with the level of knowledge people have already. Starting early also helps work through any procurement

Collaboration and how important it is to have everyone at the table. Everyone at a big table and have all ideas in the pot to create something new.

Connectivity that is allowing for shared grant applications, coordination on programming, seeing where parks adjacent to schools can be activated for students

A deep, authentic commitment to green spaces in Walnut Hills by the Reds Foundation, led by community leader, plus many other community organizations and individuals.

# Agriculture programs are driving youth leadership, academic success and workforce development

**Agriculture programs driving youth leadership, academic success, and workforce development.**

<p>a. Through the strategic partnership, there is overlap between the Career and Education (CTE) work and the Strategic Partnership for Greener Schools (SPGS). We can now see workforce pathways more clearly. We can leverage the partnership as a resource and there is momentum in this space.</p>	<p>We've been making investments in future outcomes for students health, academic, career possibilities. Investments in local economy by sourcing food from community to schools. Investments in environmental quality. There is a return on investment- in both longterm and immediate benefits.</p>	<p>The partnership has made sure the school district as the right partners. For example, this led to the Seeds of Change Brown bag grant of \$150k to fund gardens and green space. This was done for youth or with youth with few strings attached to grants.</p>
<p>b. The Aiken Farm serves as a successful model for urban agriculture and work-based learning. Agriculture programs are leading that way for youth leadership, and academic success including career, and college pathways in the district.</p>	<p>Green Career Pathways: A major success is the clear overlap with CTE work and the vision for Green Workforce pathways This is being formalized at a "districtwide level"</p>	<p>Ag program students has changed the self-fulfilling process is what non-ag students see everyday. FFA students see things they would never otherwise see. Equity: getting programs to kids who will benefit most.</p>
<p></p>	<p>Young people like these young people here are increasingly chosing the Ag pathway- it is one of the fastest growing CTE pathways in the district, competing with the health pathway and offered at multiple high schools.</p>	<p>One time FFA students helped build the compost bin. Everyone was working hard and dedicated to this program. The key people work together, the stronger something is.</p>
<p></p>	<p>Green Team is work-based learning that has us working on an Aiken Farm, planting trees for air quality, testing water quality, riding Red-Bike for air quality, and sustaining a healthy environment by removing invasive species</p>	<p>Pathways and oppotunities including the agricultural fair with Ohio State extension program</p>
<p></p>	<p>Our students have opportunities for green workplace learning to travel, work, earn money and participate in community programs</p>	<p>Worked with the Urban Wilderness Program.I think those connections has led to more students participating outside an in hands on learning.</p>
<p>c. The Agriculture program is driving changes in food access in CPS and beyond through connections to the Cincinnati Public Schools Food Services Program</p>	<p>CPS Food Services is working with Green Umbrella to support Aiken with Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) trainings. Students are going above and beyond in these workforce opportunities.</p>	<p>La Soupe is an example of this, its an organization that help Stop food waste and Teaches us how to Cook</p>
<p></p>	<p>One major key policy change is our work to implement good agricultural practices (GAP) so we can be a farm to school supplier of food to the students at our schools with our students being the farmers of the food.</p>	<p>Worked with Cancer Justice, help get supplies people in need for medical needs. Additionally, we talk to people of all ages about health and safety.</p>
<p>Agriculture programs anchoring achievement on state standards</p>	<p>At Aiken, they are doing a great job bringing in students. For example, there was an event at Aiken where students showcased food they grew. They led a workshop and let people know how they can get involved.</p>	<p>Students had the oppotunity through Green Team to travel and work in the Grand Tetons and Yellowstone while being paid.</p>
	<p>CPS met state standards for career college and military on the state report card for the first time. Ag pathway is credited for that achievement.</p>	<p>At Clark High School and Gambie High School, they have chicken eggs that are then used in the Dater culinary program.</p>
		<p>The Ohio Department of Education and Workforce helps career and technical programs. The City Seeds of Change workforce Grant opportunity is an example. (CPS couldn't apply this year, but hopes to in future.)</p>

# Centering justice and youth leadership in programs and greenspaces

**Centering justice and youth leadership in programs and greenspaces**

<p>Our community partnerships are now reciprocal in that we benefit each other by making our institutions stronger while having our students be leaders of this growth.</p>	<p>Urban agriculture and outdoor learning have become embraced by a community of students and families who have otherwise not had easy access to natural experiences.</p>	
	<p>We did not expect to see as many community members as we do who visit and use our Aiken Garden for food, animal interactions, and hiking through our prairie and woods.</p>	
	<p>The FFA program has changed over time as new people have brought new ideas. Our Aiken Farm has upgraded new structures, solar power, additional high tunnels, and animals. This gives back to the community through food and mental health.</p>	
	<p>Through FFA students have met a lot of other programs where they can learn to cook and address food waste. Learning what to do with surplus food in grocery stores and get it to people who can use it</p>	<p>La Soupe is an example of this, its an organization that help Stop food waste and Teaches us how to Cook</p>
<p>The embracing and involvement of our students who choose to go above and beyond the class, school, and leadership expectations through our agriculture career tech pathway.</p>	<p>Agricultural pathway and Aiken Farm addressing environmental justice and community health.</p>	<p>Cancer Justice: comes in to school and teach people how to prevent illness, take care of yourself, promote health, you can't have good environmental health if you're not healthy. Give out covid and flu shots who can't get it.</p>
	<p>The Cincy tree planning was our first time in schools. We had to go and understand the students: who they are and what's happening in their lives. We had to know our audience to relay the importance. We were surprised about how much they kids knew! They were teaching us: they knew photosynthesis, trees, and buds informaiton. They were ready to dig!</p>	<p>Worked with the Urban Wilderness Program.I think those connections has led to more Students participating outside an in hands on learning.</p>
	<p>It's important to make this sustainable so that it continues into the future</p>	<p>There is still a challenge of getting students informed of the opportunities and how programs can help them be successful</p>
	<p>Our community partnerships are now reciprocal in that we benefit each other by making our institutions stronger while having our students be leaders of this growth.</p>	<p>Not happening in a vacuum: interest from young people in this work and to take leadership in it. We already had fertile fields and there has always been a commitment to being outdoors. It's part of the culture in this town.</p>
	<p>Through participation in FFA, students have supported organizations in this partnership. For example, we went to city hall and met city council members that are trying to help greener environments.</p>	<p>Students recently heard about defunding CPS schools. The organizations here are the ones that help support us and truly care about us.</p>

## Centering justice and youth leadership in programs and greenspaces cont.

### Centering justice and youth leadership in programs and greenspaces

The embracing and involvement of our students who choose to go above and beyond the class, school, and leadership expectations through our agriculture career tech pathway.

Through participation in FFA, students have supported organizations in this partnership. For example, we went to city hall and met city council members that are trying to help greener environments.

Students recently heard about defunding CPS schools. The organizations here are the ones that help support us and truly care about us.

Growth over time happens changes in systems and empowerment by those most impacted: students.

One time FFA students helped build the compost bin. Everyone was working hard and dedicated to this program. The key people work together, the stronger something is.

Students brought an electrification policy before the school board and it passed.

Unexpectedly, I saw students that supported urban agriculture, and it gave me hope for the future of the community.

We've been making investments in future outcomes for students' health, academic, career possibilities, investments in local economy by sourcing food from community to schools. Investments in environmental quality. There is a return on investment- both longterm and immediate benefits.

Community members also unexpectedly visit and use the school gardens for food and mental health

Local media coverage emphasizes highlights of this initiative in Cincinnati: green roofs, the rise of greener schools, engagement of minorities in climate work, expansion of recycling initiatives, and the unexpected success was the impact of Parkers' agriculture program at Aiken High School in getting students involved and excited.

There is multi-generational interest from students, parents, and administrators that helps programs and green spaces reach more people.

We were surprised by the community feedback around maintenance and sustainability, and the need to continue prioritizing community feedback.

Historical barriers between city and community members. Having police and city officials, staff, all types of departments. be with community helps remove barriers by listening and understanding what they need. what can we do together? how can we do this together?

## Growing grassroots efforts into city-wide policy and planning

The partnership has led to increased attention with the Green Cincinnati plan. We had the city manager advocate to maintain funding. Together, we are working to equip teachers to bring green space to kids.

The highlight is the City of Cincinnati pushing for a clear communication goal on its values within the Green Cincinnati Plan, with a strong community connection. Connections are based on the long-standing relationship between the City and Green Umbrella. A key change is the successful integration of the CPS Sustainability Plan with the City of Cincinnati's plan. The unexpected contributor to success was the community's desire to get kids outside.

Children's Bill of Right was a wonderful affirmation of the city that they are not going to compromise children's access to nature

Now, there are dollars behind some of this work to support green space access and equity as well as climate equity metrics. In addition, Railroad dollars are a source of funding.

An unexpected success is that the "Nati" is so well resourced, we can now bring these dollars to bear on this work.

City and School District connection around policy: Green Cincinnati Plan and wellness policy+ green workforce development

The Green Cincinnati Plan, Office of Environment and Sustainability, and Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights are examples of changes in city policies that have emerged.

Various organizations have strategic plans that have a confluence of aligned goals. That happened as part of the coalition: Green Cincinnati plan (city) aligns school district strategic planning and CPS district wellness plan.

The creation of a Climate, Environment and Infrastructure Committee (2020-2021) with City Council Member Meeka Owen's leadership was a foundation of this work led to council members support this work. Providing specific guidance that "this is how we need to help" leads to better policy making.

a. Aligning strategic plans across organizations leads to momentum and growth in partnerships

Keep Cincinnati Beautiful as an example of an organization where leadership is keeping this as a priority. See this across organizations that sustainability is a key tenet at the leadership level for multiple organizations.

Built a sustaining collaborative effort with CPS district COO, who indicated that improving outdoor learning campuses are one of his 3 top goals. This commitment is producing outcomes including: Mapping Tree Program, district-wide procedures, and a Horticulture Training for Building Engineers

The traffic garden is designed to help them connect, advocate for biking and alternative transportation, walking and safe routes to school. This linked to the Ohio Department of Health's Healthy communities grant to use as a strategy for exercise and active living.

The Cincinnati Health Department connected the Community Health Improvement Plan to the partnership leading to funding focused on food equity. This included curriculum building around nutrition, active living programs, the Traffic Garden and connecting with teachers. This was one of the biggest successes of the grant.

Traffic gardens are simulated intersections and walkways that are painted on surface so that students can practice bike safety on school grounds.

The partnership has made sure the school district as the right partners. For example, this led to the Seeds of Change

Fiscal capital projects that emerged across campuses. Heard CPS navigate shortfall in funding-despite this, the gardens and other outdoor programs keep happening. This

Growing grassroots efforts into city-wide policy and planning

## Growing grassroots efforts into city-wide policy and planning cont.

The Traffic Garden and connecting with teachers. This was one of the biggest successes of the grant.

The partnership has made sure the school district as the right partners. For example, this led to the Seeds of Change Brown bag grant of \$150k to fund gardens and green space. This was done for youth or with youth with few strings attached to grants.

Fiscal capital projects that emerged across campuses. Heard CPS navigate shortfall in funding-despite this, the gardens and other outdoor programs keep happening. This is a credit to the collaboration because people and orgs continue to step up. Gardens being maintained and built despite shortfalls in funding

By getting everyone in the same room and having all voices heard, there was a strengthened connection between the school district and city department of public health. Together they identified a school that needed a traffic garden installation and were able to complete the installation at Roll Hill School. As a result of this effort, community members were very excited, partnerships with the district are more intentional, and those who were underserved are able to build a relationship with city employees.

Clark High School green roof installation was a highlight of this partnership along with the rise of greener school buildings

Changes in spaces include the installation of green roofs and the Traffic Garden

Green schoolyards and outdoor learning make learning visible to the community. Green schoolyard benefits go beyond learning and students.

60 of 66 CPS schools have some kind of green space. This shows how transformative the planning and infrastructure changes are, and how this can connect students to the workforce in related fields.

b. Green infrastructure is built that benefits schools, children, and the community at large.

It is a heavy lift to make it happen and this expansion is possible with Green Umbrella's help.

The district level commitment to Green Schoolyards at every schools is deploying resources to make it happen.

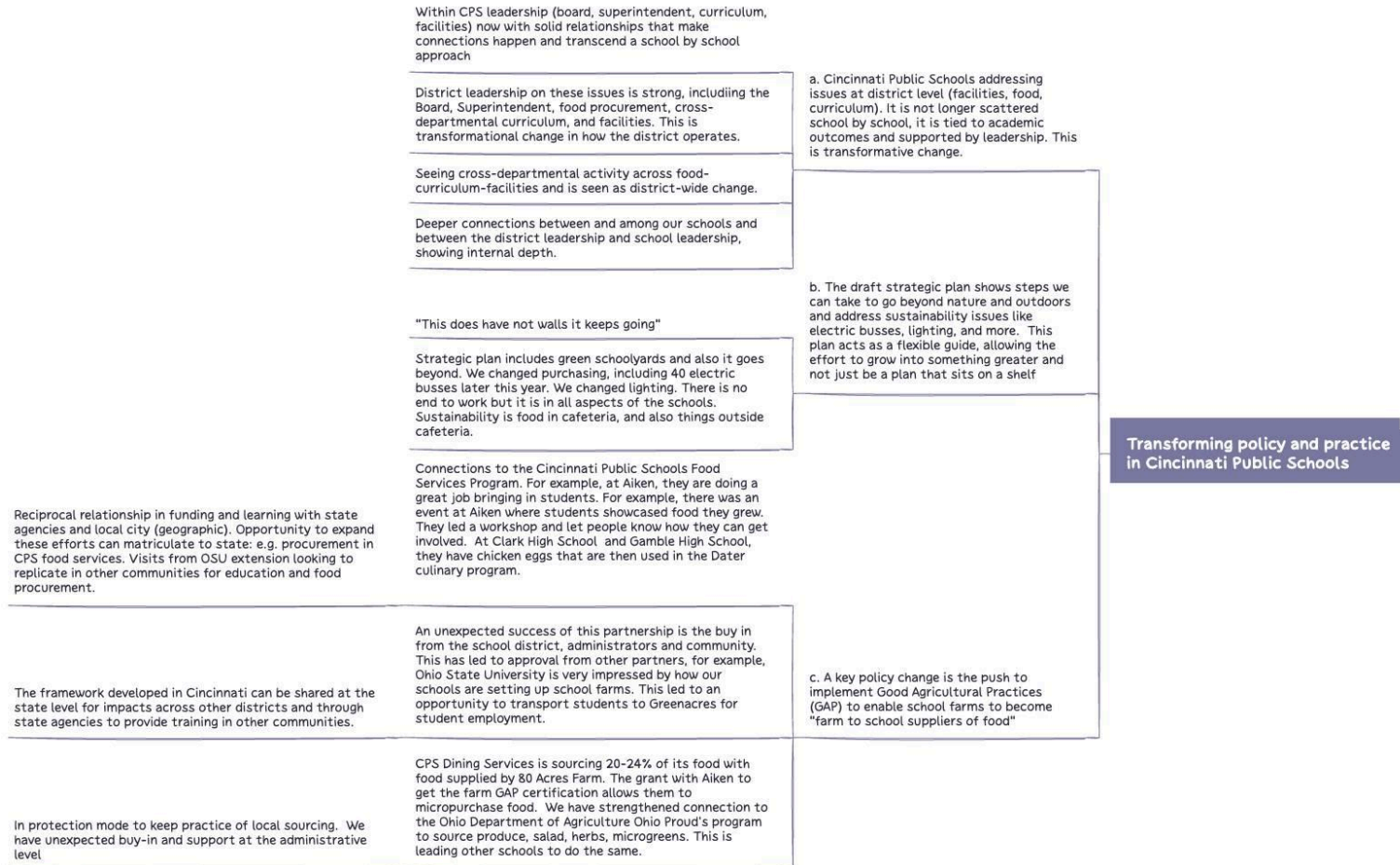
The Green Cincinnati Plan states a goal of "100% schools have safe and accessible outdoor learning spaces." As of 2025, 60 schools have to a safe outdoor learning space-SPGS is working to complete the remaining 6 through partner resource sharing.

The creation of the 'Urban Learning Garden' at the Owens Center and the rebuild of the green space across from the Frederick Douglass Elementary are new green spaces that can be used by the schools and the entire community. Public-private partnerships helped make the Park Avenue/Frederick Douglass garden rebuild possible.

Reds Community Fund's 2025 Community Makeover in Cincinnati's Walnut Hills neighborhood that included significant green space updates at Frederick Douglass Elementary, the Dr. O'dell Owens Center for Learning and the Ashland Recreation Area.

### Growing grassroots efforts into city-wide policy and planning

# Transforming policy and practice in Cincinnati Public Schools



## Overcoming challenges and barriers

Loss of federal funding leads to the necessity of collaboration to support CPS's strategic plan for outdoor learning spaces. We'll need to leverage existing resources and use grants to support smaller projects.

Deepened partnerships and connected organizations allowed partner organizations to expand their scope even with canceled funding

Changes in federal funding are disruptive and sudden

It was unexpected that through the partnership philanthropy and service providers are showing up. We are well resourced and there is money available.

Previously, a barrier was in understanding potential resources. Being at the table with others has resolved this.

For the Traffic Garden grant, the partnership helped overcome contract and procurement processes. Together, we overcame a lot of barriers, and the community came together. This is a good group of stakeholders from multiple organizations that pushed it through.

Funding cuts can impact the sustainability of projects.

Partners will pitch in to do this work for free since the school district does not have money to support it. An example is the cost savings that came through collaboration around mulch, saving the school district money.

We know who you have to have at the table to push things through, and know that the timeline of a grant may require additional push through.

The goal is to take current resources and figure out how to plug into a larger goal. I'm starting to feel movement that feels sustainable and supported by great engagement.

Students don't have enough funding for their projects.

Previously, CPS leadership transitions (4 superintendents in about 5 years) posed a challenge

With CPS, major changes and reorganization impacted tree planting initiatives led by a community partner. We had to be understanding to accommodate and make it successful.

The need for projects to be sustainable. Projects need to include maintenance plans and cost so they are not an expensive burden for CPS

Previously, there was an idea that outdoor education was an extracurricular add-on. This has shifted as the agricultural program is leading the way for academic success.

a. Navigating limited funding, grant funding and applications, and sustaining funding.

b. Strengthening partnerships with Cincinnati Public Schools

**Overcoming challenges and barriers**

## Overcoming challenges and barriers cont.

<p>Keep Cincinnati worked with specific schools in the past. This work allowed us to zoom out and work with CPS as a whole leading to greater impact.</p>	<p>expensive burden for CPS</p> <p>Previously, there was an idea that outdoor education was an extracurricular add-on. This has shifted as the agricultural program is leading the way for academic success.</p> <p>A challenge that has been overcome through partnership was a sense of competition between organizations who provide environmental education to CPS students. Now, partners can look to shared plans and the organizations to best meet the needs of students and the schools.</p>	<p>b. Strengthening partnerships with Cincinnati Public Schools</p>
<p>Bigger crises at hand: Climate change and the mental and emotional health of young people</p>	<p>An ongoing challenge is the lack of a systemic approach to whole child wellness</p>	
<p>Honestly, sometimes too many ideas and initiatives. We need them to ensure some things stick, but I know sometimes the sheer amount of ideas and initiatives gets overwhelming to keep up with.</p>	<p>Shared understanding that we cannot do this alone- there is so much to be done to accomplish this goal and necessity of partnerships.</p>	
<p>How do the community gardens coordinated by the civic garden center intersect or not with green schoolyards?</p>		
<p>The lack of involvement from some city stakeholders in understanding the complex barriers, and the need to make this understanding a pillar of the work</p>	<p>Barriers between the city and community members can have a big impact. Using language such as "I understand, I empathize, let's fix it" creates a roundtable of boots on the ground and the cultivation of a true community relationships</p>	<p>c. Building a shared understanding and making sure that community and partners are involved.</p>
<p>Some boards and stakeholders have a different non-contextual view on education and how we play a role in the larger partnership strategy</p>		
<p>Engagement is a key element: In 2023, tree planting in CPS at an elementary and high school. At one of the high schools, one person was resistant at first but we engaged with her and got her excited about the process. We asked about her interests and talked about the process. By the end, she loved it and was getting dirty while planting.</p>	<p>We could have done more to increase community buy-on at schools to help with maintenance</p>	
<p>Continued awareness to the benefits of nature and safe green spaces. Which is also the way and reason this work needs to be done</p>	<p>Challenges include lack of community education and awareness of CPS progress.</p>	

## Overcoming challenges and barriers