

Healthy WorksSM

School and Community Gardens Intervention

Joint Use Gardens : Building Communities, Supporting Schools

In a time of shrinking budgets, joint use projects provide an opportunity for schools and communities to work together to maximize resources and achieve shared goals. Establishing a joint use garden—a garden shared by a community and a school, typically on school land, with some plots designated for school use and some for community residents—is a great way to share resources, build relationships that strengthen a community, promote exercise and healthy eating, and ensure the sustainability of a school garden.

Benefits of Joint Use Gardens

Joint use gardens offer many benefits, especially in urban areas, where space for gardening is scarce:

- Students gain from opportunities for experiential learning and intergenerational engagement.
- Teachers and after-school staff gain from having gardening expertise close at hand.
- Schools receive support and assistance in maintaining the garden
- The entire school shares in the pride that comes from having a thriving garden on campus.
- Community residents get a place to garden nearby, access to healthy, affordable food, and a way to contribute to their neighborhood by beautifying school grounds and sharing their knowledge with youth.
- For many gardeners, especially parents and grandparents, the garden enhances their connection to the school, their neighbors, and the community.

Joint Use Partnerships

Joint use is happening in cities throughout California and across the nation. In fact, the concept of joint use is not new. Schools have shared their land and facilities for community use for over 200 years. Most states, including California, have policies to encourage or require schools to make facilities open to the public¹. In California, a 2008 survey conducted by the Center for Cities and Schools revealed that close to 60 percent of responding school districts already have some type of joint use partnership. San Diego Unified School District, for example, is a partner in over 40 joint use agreements.

Joint use partnerships can be formal (based on a legal document) or informal (based on a handshake), but formal agreements offer increased protections for both the facility and the community group using the facility. Since school staffing can change over time, personal relationships are not the most secure way to guarantee access to facilities into the future. A formal agreement can also help prevent problems related to maintenance, operations, liability, ownership, or cost from arising.

¹ The Community Recreation Act and the California Civic Center Act promote the use of California school facilities for community purposes. The Community Recreation Act allows public agencies and schools to “do any and all things necessary or convenient to aid and cooperate in carrying out” community recreation programs that “promote and preserve the health and general welfare of the people of the state.” The California Civic Center Act identifies public school facilities as civic centers for the convening of any public groups that pertain to the educational, political, economic, artistic, and moral interests of the citizens of the communities in which they reside.

School districts may be reluctant to open school property to the community after hours, concerned about the legal risks and the costs associated with injury or property damage. The good news is that California state law offers school districts strong protections against lawsuits. By prudently maintaining their property, carrying insurance, and requiring groups who use their property to maintain insurance—and by entering into formal joint use agreements—districts can minimize their risk.

There's no single path to developing a joint use agreement, and crafting a successful one requires care, cooperation, and ongoing communication among the partners as they address concerns and work out logistics. A first step in developing a partnership is to bring key stakeholders together to talk about their vision for the project and begin building relationships. People to include are school and district leadership, teachers, after-school staff, parents, community residents, and representatives from city government and local nonprofit organizations. As the partnership evolves, clearly spelling out each partners' roles and responsibilities and putting these into an agreement will minimize any potential conflict and ensure that the benefits of the partnership outweigh the challenges.

Resources

For excellent information on joint use partnerships, including a joint use toolkit and sample agreements, visit the websites of these organizations:

- National Policy and Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity: <http://www.nplanonline.org/nplan/joint-use>
- Prevention Institute, JointUse.Org: <http://www.jointuse.org/home/>
- California Project Lean: <http://www.californiaprojectlean.org/doc.asp?id=224&parentid=221>
- Center for Cities and Schools: <http://citiesandschools.berkeley.edu/>



Made possible by funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, through the County of San Diego.

The Healthy WorksSM School and Community Gardens Intervention is implemented in partnership with the University of California San Diego and the San Diego County Childhood Obesity Initiative, a program facilitated by Community Health Improvement Partners.