

**CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS
THE NEW SCHOOL**

A Schoolyard in Brooklyn

Strengthening Families
and Communities Through
the Innovative Use of
Public Space

by JOHN KIXMILLER WITH ANDREW WHITE and ROB FISCHER

CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS
MILANO THE NEW SCHOOL
FOR MANAGEMENT AND URBAN POLICY

June 2007



The Center for New York City Affairs is dedicated to advancing innovative public policies that strengthen neighborhoods, support families and reduce urban poverty. Our tools include rigorous analysis; journalistic research; candid public dialogue with stakeholders; and strategic planning with government officials, nonprofit practitioners and community residents.

Andrew White, Director
Barbara Solow, Staff Editor
Mia Lipsit, Program Manager
Carolyn Gilles, Coordinator

Jessica Donner, David Howe and
Linda Silva Thompson, Research Assistants

This paper was made possible thanks to the generous support of the Child Welfare Fund, the Ira W. DeCamp Foundation and the Sirius Fund.

Additional editing by Sasha Nyary

John Kixmiller is co-director of Neighborhood Center, a program of the Center for Family Life in Sunset Park.

Copyright © 2007 The New School

Center for New York City Affairs
72 Fifth Avenue, 6th floor
New York, NY 10011
Tel 212.229.5418
Fax 212.229.5335
centernyc@newschool.edu

www.newschool.edu/milano/nyc affairs

Contents

3	Executive Summary
5	Recommendations from the Field
6	Bloomberg's Ambitious Playground Plan
8	A Troubled Public Space
10	Year One: Controlling the Space and Establishing a Safe Environment
12	Year Two: A Broader Vision of the Community plaza
13	Year Three: Growing Fast, Protecting Participants, Encouraging Girls
14	September 11th: The Community Responds
15	Year Four: A Balancing Act
16	Year Five and Beyond
17	Conclusion

A Schoolyard in Brooklyn

Strengthening Families
and Communities Through
the Innovative Use of
Public Space

Executive Summary

Early on a sultry Friday evening in July in Brooklyn's Sunset Park, the large schoolyard at P.S. 503/506 is packed. A softball game ends and 25 teenaged boys and young men gather on the basketball court, taking shots and getting ready for the evening's games. Girls play soccer nearby, a boy reads a picture book about dinosaurs aloud to a half dozen children, and several older women play cards and other games at tables nearby.

Vendors sell ices, roasted corn, mangos and tacos. Two women help teenaged girls plant seedlings in raised garden beds. Young children scream and run through the sprinkler. Teenagers at the entrance to the yard take the names of everyone who comes inside. They will tally 200 names tonight.

This is Neighborhood Center, a program of the Center for Family Life. Each year, more than 2,500 children and parents from the community are regular participants in the games, social life and services of this protected community plaza in the heart of a working-class and largely immigrant neighborhood. For seven months of the year, the programs are run in the schoolyard, which has come to be known as a community plaza.

The community plaza at P.S. 503/506 (formerly P.S. 314) is an affordable and practical model for reclaiming urban community space, encouraging vibrant outdoor cultural life, promoting safe recreation for young people and supporting the development of social networks and friendships. It offers a prototype for remaking the city's many poorly used urban schoolyards and parks.

In May 2007, Mayor Michael Bloomberg announced his PlaNYC 2030 framework for making New York a more livable, environmentally sustainable city. The plan builds upon population projections that assume tremendous growth in certain city neighborhoods—as well as a total 2030 population far larger than today's. But the administration also looked at current community needs and concluded that there are several neighborhoods, even today, that fall far short of the desirable amount of open space.

*The community
plaza at P.S.
503/506 is an
affordable and
practical model
for reclaiming
urban
community
space.*

One seemingly modest initiative among the many proposed in PlaNYC 2030 calls for the opening of 290 schoolyards to community residents during hours when school is not in session. As we report in the following pages, this is an admirable pledge that echoes others from past administrations—but it also raises a host of problematic questions in need of resolution.

In Sunset Park, as in many urban neighborhoods, families have long struggled to find programs and spaces where their children could be safe and supervised after school, in the evening and on weekends. Like other neighborhoods, this community is notoriously short of space for outdoor life, especially communal space that offers adults a chance to interact with their children and other young people or that provides opportunities for family activities.

Neighborhood Center began as an effort by organizers and young people at the Center for Family Life to engage marginalized teens who were using the schoolyard for drugs, drinking and gang meetings. It turned into something even more significant and extraordinary.

Sunset Park and the P.S. 503/506 schoolyard provide a wealth of valuable lessons for the rest of the city. Schoolyards like this one can be a powerful resource, not only for unguided play but for community building. They provide a low-cost vehicle for interweaving the practice of three fast-growing, overlapping fields in urban social policy: family support, youth development and community building.

Last summer, the Sunset Park schoolyard went through a season-long renovation after many months of community planning coordinated in part by the Trust for Public Land's City Spaces program. It was an affirmation of more than a decade's work at Neighborhood Center. This year, as the play space becomes yet again the centerpiece of a new urban summer, the children, parents and young men and women of the community will share a new turf field and renovated play spaces along with the long-established spirit of the community plaza.

This report tells the story of Neighborhood Center's first several years, tracing its original structure and tracking its evolution as its organizers responded to the ever-changing needs—and the changing definition—of the community they served. Its primary author, John Kixmiller, has been a director of the programs at Neighborhood Center since their beginnings more than a decade ago, so this story is told from the vantage point of having been there, in the middle of the action.

Most of all, this story offers important lessons for any organization working in a neighborhood starved of safe, pleasant and family-friendly communal space.

Acknowledgements

The lead author of this report would like to acknowledge the collaboration of a team of Center for Family Life staff who over the years have made the Neighborhood Center project rewarding and fulfilling.

One seemingly modest initiative among those proposed in PlaNYC 2030 calls for the opening of 290 schoolyards to community residents during hours when school is not in session.

Recommendations from the Field

Schoolyards are a tremendous potential resource for New Yorkers, not simply for all-important recreation but also for building stronger communities and supporting resilient families. Today, hundreds of such yards are closed to the public, even during the hours when schools are not in session—but perhaps not for much longer, as Mayor Bloomberg moves forward with a plan to open dozens of locked-up schoolyards to communities, perhaps as soon as next year.

The story in these pages describes a vision for public space that evolved over many years of practical experience in a schoolyard in Brooklyn. Community leaders, young people, school staff and the parents who helped to create Neighborhood Center at PS 503/506 were constantly learning new lessons about what was possible, what was desirable and what it would take to create a space that was attractive and useful to thousands of people of all ages and backgrounds. Today, these lessons are essential knowledge for administrators and citizens citywide.

LESSON 1: City Hall must establish clear roles and responsibilities for maintenance and management of these public spaces. In the past, a persistent lack of clarity (and relentless gear-grinding of government bureaucracy) made it difficult for neighborhood residents to fully benefit from the shared use of schoolyards (see article, page 6). Who will make routine repairs and clean up each day? Who will decide when yards can be reserved exclusively for after school and summer camp programs? Most importantly, who will define the rules governing the relationship between the community and the school? Multiple agencies and organizations are bound to be involved, ranging from the Department of Education to the Department of Parks and local community groups. Each of them needs to have a say, know their role and live up to it.

LESSON 2: Each schoolyard opened to the public needs a specific plan for establishing clear rules and lines of authority in the play area. Who will decide—and enforce—what games are acceptable? How will toddlers be protected from flying soccer balls and hard-hit baseballs? Who will define what games are played at what time? How do people sign up to use a field or basketball court? Who has the authority to remove rowdy players who flout the rules? In Sunset Park, Brooklyn, leaders of the community organization overseeing the schoolyard took on this role in collaboration with young people and parents. Once rules were established and enforced, the yard became safer and more attractive to a large and diverse group of people—and was no longer the exclusive playground of a relatively small group of young men. For reserving playing fields and courts, simply establishing a permit process is not enough—active oversight is required so those with the rights to the space either use it or lose it to others in a fair and orderly way. Community-based organizations are often better placed than the Department of Parks to keep control of this process.

LESSON 3: City Hall should make large schoolyards more family-friendly, attractive and usable by young children and teens, parents and caregivers. These yards can be transformative places for neighborhoods and families, controlled areas where parents and grandparents are sure their young children are safe, even as they keep a distant eye on their older children and spend time with their friends and neighbors. Community programs can take root for young and old alike, from gardening to reading programs to arts and crafts, alongside athletic activities. But this requires that local administrators plan and manage the space for people of all ages and multiple interests, not just for those who want to play organized sports.

LESSON 4: Organizers must promote values of community ownership to protect against vandalism. In Sunset Park, the more invested local residents became, the more likely they were to keep an eye on the playground after dark and report vandalism. Community organizing around the design of capital improvements—as the Trust for Public Land has proven—is one way to build community investment and ensure that schoolyards become the kind of place neighborhood residents want to spend time. But this engagement must continue over time. Community organizations should have city government support to develop structures for youth leadership, youth employment and parent involvement in setting rules and setting up programs connected to the schoolyards.

LESSON 5: Wherever possible, City Hall should tap community-based organizations to play the role of schoolyard organizer and manager. Many community organizations are well-placed to mediate among local residents, schools and other government agencies that may oversee the properties. Organizations that already hold city contracts for Beacon School, after school and other programs can help gather the modest resources necessary for collaborating with local parents and youth in order to provide consistent oversight during non-school hours, help to establish rules that are honored by participants and solve problems as they arise. The Beacons are great places to start—they are open evenings, weekends and in summertime, exactly the times when these schoolyards can best serve New York’s families.

LESSON 6: City Hall should establish schoolyard management as an element of Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD) contracts with community-based organizations. The department already oversees contracts with organizations in after school programs, Beacons, Summer Youth Employment and many other areas that overlap directly with the ideal uses of these schoolyards. The agency is well-structured to support community groups, unlike the departments of education and parks. Many DYCD contract organizations also have community advisory councils, which should be expanded to include school administrators and other schoolyard stakeholders.

Bloomberg's Ambitious Playground Plan

CITY HALL HAS PROPOSED OPENING HUNDREDS OF SCHOOLYARDS TO THE PUBLIC ON EVENINGS AND WEEKENDS. IT'S A DESIRABLE ARRANGEMENT, BUT FAR FROM SIMPLE TO ACCOMPLISH.

Not enough playground space in the metropolis? The solution appears as obvious as the sun in the summer sky: hundreds of public schoolyards sit empty during evenings and weekends, locked behind chain link fences. Open the gates! Give the children a place to roam free.

That's one of the many visionary messages in Mayor Michael Bloomberg's new plan for greening the city as the population grows toward 9 million people over the next 23 years. City Hall's recently announced framework for developing a greener, more sustainable city, known as PlaNYC 2030, includes scores of initiatives designed to reduce the city's carbon footprint, renew its infrastructure and create additional open outdoor space for communities to enjoy. The plan's authors identify 290 schoolyards—the majority of them in Brooklyn, Queens, Washington Heights and the Bronx—to be opened as public playgrounds in neighborhoods that currently lack sufficient open space. Of these, City Hall's initial plan says "69 of them could be opened tomorrow; simply unlocking the gates will open an equipped playground—a long overdue solution."

But in New York, there is a long history of attempts to share playgrounds between schools and the general public—and they have frequently led to unexpected conflicts over control, upkeep and access. For the mayor's new plan to succeed, City Hall and neighborhood residents will have to determine who is in charge of the schoolyards, who is allowed to play in them during non-school hours and who will set the rules, clean up after dogs and picnickers, negotiate with police for security, repair broken basketball rims and much, much more. Some playgrounds have been havens for drug users and teenage gangs. Others are sites of neighborhood disputes about what games are appropriate: Is it okay for grown men to play hardball baseball or tackle football as toddlers scramble around the swing sets? In a crowded community, clear lines of authority are essential over the uses—and misuses—of open public playground space.

The mayor's office is not yet ready to release details about how the schoolyards might be managed for public use. The administration's proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2008, still in negotiations with the City Council as this report goes to press, includes an initial \$3.5 million in new funds for the Department of Education to support opening more schoolyards. But not all 69 sites would come online at once. Officials say spending for maintenance costs under the still undefined program is expected to increase in years to come. As for the other 221 playgrounds on the list, the city will need to invest an estimated \$110 million in capital funding for renovations over the next 10 years.

The PlaNYC authors also offer no insights, as yet, into how they intend to engage communities in planning and overseeing the playgrounds, nor

how the various agencies responsible for open space and public school property will address the inevitable contest for limited space.

What's not in question is the need for more places for people to congregate and play. Established city standards suggest there should be a playground for every 1,250 children, but the administration has found that neighborhoods in need of new play space average one playground for every 2,100 children. The limits on urban recreation space may be a factor in one of the city's most pressing public health problems: The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene reported in 2003 that 43 percent of students in city schools are overweight and the obesity rate among city children is 24 percent, well above the national average.

In the heyday of city parks development, when Robert Moses was Parks Commissioner between 1934 and 1960, New York increased the number of city playgrounds from 119 to 777. Moses accomplished this expansion in part by converting existing schoolyards into "jointly operated playgrounds," the first of which opened at Fort Hamilton in 1938. These joint operations transferred schoolyard authority from the Board of Education to the Department of Parks, with the intent of highlighting that the space was indeed public land. During school hours, students had exclusive right to the playground space, but after the final bell, the gates were supposed to open up to the surrounding community.

This arrangement between the education and parks agencies quickly proved problematic. Growing schools—and those in need of renovation—desperately needed to use playground space for other purposes, including the ubiquitous prefabricated temporary classrooms that sit beside schools under construction and those that are overcrowded. School administrators also wanted to protect their yards for the use of their own after school sports and recreation programs.

By the early 1970s, with more than 250 jointly operated playgrounds (JOPs) opened throughout the five boroughs, city administrators concluded the relationships between schools and communities were too contentious to continue the program's rapid expansion. But the existing JOPs were not dissolved, and the city developed a handful of new ones over the next decades. Today there are 269 JOPs in New York City. Many work well, but others continue to be the focal point of tensions between school leaders and their neighbors.

In 2005, the Lower East Side community board passed a resolution against P.S. 63's exclusive control of the neighboring playground at McKinley Park, on the block between East 3rd and 4th streets off Avenue A, for its after school program.

"It is called J-O-P," says the chair of the community board's parks committee, Richard Ropiak. "The 'P' stands for playground. It's not

called 'schoolyard'. The property is not under the jurisdiction of the Department of Education, it is under the jurisdiction of the Department of Parks." Ropiak wants the Parks Department to exert its authority over the playground and override the school's principal, who keeps the playground locked after the school day ends. "Thus far, that has not occurred," says Ropiak.

A New York City Housing Authority development sits directly across the street from McKinley Park. Its residents "went to that school and became adults with families and want their children to use the playground," says Ropiak. "Where would you suggest that their children go?"

But Principal Hibren Salazar, in her 20th year at P.S. 63, sees things differently. On weekends, graffiti invariably shows up on school walls and doors and has to be cleaned off. She's unhappy that even after she agreed to move the children inside at 4:30 pm this spring, very few community residents are using the park. Most of all, she feels the dispute is misguided.

"There shouldn't be a distinction between the children that attend a school and the community," she says. "The children who attend this school are part of this community. They shouldn't be pitted one against the other."

While many JOPs survive peacefully, conflicts over who controls the space between the end of school and dusk, when most city parks close, are routine. Officials concede there is no simple formula for determining who has the right to use the properties in these off-hours, and add that they have no intention of reviving the JOP model for the scores of playgrounds they now hope to open for public use. Nor are they ready to comment on how much power school principals and administrators will have in order to decide who can use the playgrounds during non-school hours.

Some public/private partnerships have succeeded in coordinating extensive renovations of playgrounds for schools and communities. The City Spaces program at the Trust for Public Land, a national, nonprofit land conservation organization, has led a campaign in recent years to match donor dollars with funds from the city's parks and education departments for capital redevelopment projects, usually amounting to about \$1 million per site. Students at the schools adjoining or near the playgrounds contribute to their design, as do members of neighborhood organizations. And in non-school hours, the renovated spaces are intended to be open to the entire community.

The program has completed 10 sites and another eight are under construction this spring and summer, according to Mary Alice Lee of the Trust for Public Land. "One of the things we've noticed is a great way to make a great place is to really have community involvement in the programming of that space," she says. By 2010, the organization intends to complete 25 playground renovations in partnership with the Department of Education.

At each of the school playgrounds, the organization collaborates with a community sponsor. The sponsors usually have a record running after school programs in the schoolyards, and are generally well-placed to mediate between school administrators and neighborhood residents. The schoolyard at P.S. 503/506 in Sunset Park went through the renovation process in 2006, with the Center for Family Life and its Neighborhood Center serving as the community sponsor.

While City Spaces has been very successful at raising the capital funds and managing reconstruction, the ongoing operation of the playgrounds—meant for schoolchildren as well as the public—can still pose problems of control and ambiguous authority.

One City Spaces planning participant, the after school program run by East Side House Settlement at P.S. 43 in the Mott Haven section of the Bronx, had to give up using the space it had helped design largely because school rules and parks department policies led to complications that administrators felt they could not afford to deal with.

In 2002, kids at P.S. 43 helped design the revitalization of Ranaqua Park, less than half a block from the school. The Trust for Public Land helped turn a block-long slab of fenced-in asphalt into a playground featuring a basketball court, a grass playing field, swings and playground equipment. But under Education Department rules, every child needed permission slips to leave the school and go to the playground. And there was confusion about who was responsible for routine cleaning and maintenance. In the end, the after school program ran out of resources for the extra work necessary to use the renovated play space, according to the program's deputy director. Today, the students are back playing in the small fenced-in space behind the school.

"It was a combination of circumstances," says Jacque Reed of East Side House Settlement, the community sponsor that runs P.S. 43's after school program. "It was not anything from the Trust for Public Land. [It was] no failure on their part."

And yet, the lack of clarity and the complexities of administration played a part in limiting access. As City Hall proceeds with the Open Space initiative of PlaNYC 2030, there's no doubt the playground proposal will be popular in communities that desperately need more open space. The mayor's office has spoken with Trust for Public Land leaders to discuss community outreach models, and city officials pledge that neighborhood involvement will be fundamental to their new playground effort.

Even so, the mechanisms for making sure everyone has a fair shot at using the playgrounds—and the need for clarity over rule-making, management, security and access—are sure to require much more attention than simply throwing open the gates.

—Rob Fischer

A Troubled Public Space

Sunset Park is a diverse, rapidly growing community of more than 120,000 people, many of whom are recent immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean who have joined longtime Puerto Rican residents, a growing Asian community and a few old European immigrant families, as well as many white newcomers. Almost a third of the population is under age 18, and about one in four families had incomes below the poverty line at the time of the latest census. The population is constantly changing, bringing new life, businesses and sustained hope to the people of Sunset Park.

The 29-year-old Center for Family Life provides a number of services and programs in the neighborhood, including youth leadership and recreation, job placement, family counseling, foster care and much more. At P.S. 503/506, the organization runs a city-funded community center with after school programs for 350 children, a teen volunteer program for 100 young people, a youth council that works with staff to create evening teen activities, and a mix of programs for parents such as GED classes and a parents' council. It is one of many such "Beacon Schools" scattered around the city, run by neighborhood groups during after school hours, on weekends and in the summer.

For most of its history, P.S. 503/506 has been known as P.S. 314. The schoolyard, which stretches from 59th to 60th Street along Fourth Avenue, was not always an inviting place. Throughout the 1980s and '90s, the space outside the Beacon program's doors was more of a problem than an asset, even in daylight hours. Neighborhood teenagers and young adults who had no involvement with the school or the after school programs used the yard to smoke pot, drink and intimidate other kids. This was one of the few places in the community where they could avoid attracting the attention of police.

The schoolyard had other problems. Dog owners often let their large dogs run free here, off their leashes. Frequent adult summer baseball games scared off anyone with small children, as hard line drives peppered the large rectangle. Police refused to patrol the yard, which is set a few feet below street level behind a tall fence. And each summer morning, school custodians had to sweep up used hypodermic needles, empty plastic crack baggies and broken beer bottles. Locks placed on the gate only prompted vandals to cut holes in the fence.

The problems with the schoolyard typified larger problems in the community. In 1998 and early 1999, a community study by Metis Associates and funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation surveyed 266 parents. The residents clearly felt Sunset Park posed high hurdles for parents struggling to raise their children in safety. Most of them thought the neighborhood was a good place to live—but nearly half felt it was not a good place to raise children.

Why the apparent contradiction? Most of those surveyed thought the best things about Sunset Park were its social networks, services, the "neighborhood atmosphere" and its schools. But the worst things were drugs, gangs and violence, crime and the teens hanging out on the streets. Almost half the parents felt the parks were not safe, that children had too few supervised after school opportunities, and that they had few opportunities to gain entry into their children's social world. Parents also felt there wasn't much civic participation among residents, especially when it came to trying to solve problems or improve the community.

Many of the teens hanging out in the yard in those years were involved with gangs. After some of them beat up Rafael, a Beacon youth leader, in a nearby subway station, it was clear that something had to be done. One afternoon in February 1999, the Beacon codirector, Jennifer, and Cisco, a former Beacon staff member who is now a city police officer, spoke with a group of seven Crips hanging out in the schoolyard. They ranged in age from 12 to 17. Some had participated in the Beacon programs, including a boy who had recently been caught entering the school with a large knife. After some small talk they got to the main issue:

Neighborhood teenagers and young adults who had no involvement with the school or the after school programs used the yard to smoke pot, drink and intimidate other kids.

Jennifer: Well, what did happen with Rafael?

Big Angelo: That wasn't us, Rafael's my boy, I just jumped in to protect him. I know he said I was in it but I think he couldn't tell that I was fighting for him.

Jennifer: Hmmm. So who were the guys that beat him up?

Big Angelo: I don't know. Just some guys. That wasn't us.

Jennifer: Who's us?

Angelo: You know, Crips.

Cisco: So all y'all are Crips?

[The boys all nod in assent.]

Cisco: So what is this Crip thing doing for you?

Angelo: It's something to do.

John: It's like a family, someone's always got your back.

Big Angelo: Some of us were born to be Crips.

Jennifer: Born into it?

Angelo: If I had a job, I wouldn't be a Crip.

Jennifer: So let's get you a job. I worry about what you guys are getting into with this stuff. You'll wind up getting into trouble, spending time in jail, for what?

Angelo: I was locked up this summer, got out, I could get a job with my mom, she makes a lot of money, but you know...

Big Angelo: I been to jail since I was 13. What am I gonna do, just keep going, you know? I stopped selling before I went to court the last time.

Jennifer: Let me ask you guys something. What's happening with school? Angelo, are you in school now?

Big Angelo: Yeah, I just haven't gone in two months.... John hasn't been in school in a year, talk to him.

John: Yeah, well I was in school, then I went back home for two months but my grandmother didn't want me anymore. So now I came back.

Jennifer: Who do you live with?

John: My mom.

Jennifer: What do you do all day?

John: Chill, then come outside.

YEAR ONE: CONTROLLING THE SPACE AND ESTABLISHING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

From its start until 1999, the Beacon program was almost entirely indoors. It lacked the capacity to integrate many new teens beyond those already participating in the most popular programs. What's more, the security requirements and the dress and behavior codes demanded by the school environment made it difficult to include teens who had no desire to comply.

But the Beacon's organizers and the youth council felt they needed to find a way to work with the teens who spent so much time in the schoolyard and on the streets. They could see the opportunity the schoolyard posed. After all, outdoor culture was a fundamental part of life in Sunset Park.

In early 1999, the Center for Family Life received a grant of \$40,000 from the Pinkerton Foundation to engage 80 local teens through activities and to "establish them as influential leaders of Beacon activities with other teens in the marginal community." That summer, the group set out to incorporate a new set of programs for a new group of teens, intending to integrate marginalized youth into the Beacon teen community, reduce drug abuse and improve the long-neglected schoolyard.

With about 3,000 square feet, the schoolyard is the largest public open space within more than 10 blocks, with a main entrance to the large paved rectangle on 59th Street. Along the 60th Street side is a separate, fenced-in play yard with slides and a water sprinkler. The school building fronts Third Avenue, and there is a large patio dividing it into sections, as well as a parking lot for teachers.

That first summer, the program had five staff working Monday through Thursday, 4 to 8 p.m. A new advisory group of teens, including some former youth council members, also helped out, many of them employed through the government-funded Summer Youth Employment Program. The Beacon Center purchased new equipment, including a freestanding basketball hoop to make a full court opposite a hoop permanently mounted on the fence. With new computers and a video camera, they also ran evening computer and video classes.

The most significant change in the schoolyard that summer was a new atmosphere of safety. This required focused effort by the staff, who immediately took on the factors that had stopped the community from using the yard in the past.

The first problem involved creating an appropriate schedule for different sports and age groups. Adult baseball players had often monopolized the large rectangle and scared away other users. Children could not ride bikes, neighbors were angry at frequent balls hit out of the park and basketball players on the nearby court were annoyed at balls hit into the midst of their games. At first, the staff negotiated an agreement with the baseball players that allowed them to play during two of the four staffed evenings, freeing up the yard for the other two nights for full-court basketball and other activities. But within a week, a fight broke out between the baseball and basketball players and a basketball player was stabbed and hospitalized. Police were called, baseball players were arrested and the group did not return to the schoolyard.

The staff then set up a soccer field for "six versus six" (six players against six players) games on the asphalt, using indoor hockey goals. The staff purchased colored vests to distinguish the teams, lots of soccer balls—as these tended to get lost or stolen and had a short life cycle on the asphalt—a full set of cones to mark the field and, eventually, a real set of soccer goals.

As a result, a steady group of new participants began to show up, mostly Latin American immigrants who had played street soccer in their own countries. Over the summer this group participated more regularly than any other in the schoolyard, and players in the 10-minute round-robin games ranged from 10-year-olds to adults. As the older players began to arrive after 6 p.m., the staff would gradually remove the younger ones.

The staff established tight rules and constant refereeing, primarily to prevent confrontations from the heavily physical play.

The staff established tight rules and constant refereeing, primarily to prevent confrontations from the heavily physical play. The new program served to give this group, mostly new arrivals in Sunset Park, some legitimacy in the schoolyard, as well as some inclusion in a larger community network.

Sports now dominated the large rectangle. Some space remained for bike riders and spectators. Small groups of people played table games nearby.

But the staff wanted to have greater control over who entered the yard, so they set up a registration table near the entrance and required everyone 10 years and older to enroll in the program and sign in every time they came to the schoolyard. They chose not to enroll children under the age of 10 because there were no activities for them and they were afraid of being used as a babysitting service (at this point, the playground on 60th Street was not yet a part of the program).

The relaxed community presence and the new structure of the sports and games persuaded most people to be cooperative. Even so, the enrollment and registration process was not easy. Many people were unwilling to sign in, perhaps because the schoolyard program was especially popular with undocumented immigrants who had good reason to avoid calling attention to themselves. Still, with persistence, many of the newcomers eventually agreed to enroll, perhaps because some of the employees working in the new outdoor program were well-known to the participants. Of the 202 participants who enrolled during this first summer in the schoolyard, 80 had never before enrolled in a Center for Family Life program.

The next challenge was engaging the teens who seemed to live in the schoolyard, at least for much of their waking hours. Many of these teens, known to the staff as “the lost boys,” associated with gang members. But they were also influential members of the community and some had shown tremendous leadership ability. The staff decided to try to integrate them into the program, recruiting six of them as outdoor workers in the Summer Youth Employment Program.

The boys had problems getting to work on time and performing a variety of tasks, but they helped the staff avoid both individual and gang conflicts, and also maneuvered well in calming the constant rivalries among Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans and Central Americans.

The new atmosphere that summer, combined with a number of talks with groups smoking marijuana, convinced the drug users to move outside the yard, at least when the program was in session. Gangs had long met in the schoolyard, and if they arrived as a group on a program night, they would often simply decline to enter rather than sign in.

The summer program closed in late August, giving the staff time to debrief and plan for the indoor program. The enrollment numbers surprised them. They had enrolled 202 participants, almost two-thirds of them teenagers, most of them between 14 and 20. Just 10 percent were females, and another 10 percent were adults. It was mostly teen and adult males wanting to play soccer and basketball.

That fall, as school began, the Beacon Center decided to establish a Sunday indoor soccer program to hold the interest of some of the players from the summertime games. They hired a soccer coach, established links with clubs and travel teams, created tournaments and helped their own players to travel to other schools for tournaments. They merged with a local travel club, the Brooklyn Patriots, to create access to fields, different levels of play and a larger and more resourceful soccer community.

In their continued efforts to reach out to teens, the staff also formed a new youth council, recruiting new program members from the outdoor participants. They also created new program-wide teen events, which helped families from the outdoor program get children involved in school-aged child care by using teens as caretakers, and other indoor programs. And as a result, many more families began to learn about the holistic family support programs available through the Center for Family Life.

The new atmosphere that summer, combined with a number of talks with groups smoking marijuana, convinced the drug users to move outside the yard.

YEAR TWO: A BROADER VISION OF THE COMMUNITY PLAZA

In April 2000, the Beacon opened up the outdoor soccer space and by May the four-day-a-week program in the schoolyard had begun anew. As more and more family groups began to show up, the leadership began to understand that this was much more than a teen program. They recast the schoolyard as “Neighborhood Center” and decided to adopt a broader point of view, creating new activities to engage more people, needs and interests.

They began to think more broadly of the yard as a kind of community plaza, similar to a town square in Central America, but centered around a public school rather than a Spanish cathedral. Now, although they continued to reach out to teens, the entire schoolyard and everyone in it was considered to be a part of a larger community environment. Once the weather warmed up the staff tried to create an atmosphere of family involvement by encouraging local vendors of piragua, corn, mangos and tacos to set up inside the schoolyard; running the sprinklers every day; staffing the playground to ensure safety; and hanging a new plastic construction fence on crowded days to separate the soccer field from the children using the yard for bikes and scooters.

With increased usage, of course, came the constant anxiety of having a crowded park serving many different ages and activities. Bikes were banned in the playground at all times and in the large rectangle after 6 p.m. on crowded nights. Soccer balls kicked over the fence into the play yard or street were punished by automatic loss of the game and a red card for the night for the offending player.

All the various corners of the playground were put to use. Food vendors lined the edges. Toddlers splashed in the fountain. It all came together in a multigenerational gathering of neighbors having fun, cooling off in the hot summer, meeting their neighbors, learning about the city and even picking up a few skills.

The staff stepped up its registration and attendance records by placing teenaged volunteers and an adult staff member at the entrance desk. Now, they tried to supervise and keep attendance for the entire environment, including mothers with toddlers in the play yard. This wasn't always easy. It was still possible to get into the schoolyard by avoiding the registration desk, and it was still difficult to get enrollments for infants and toddlers. Most of the Chinese immigrant participants never registered because there were no Chinese speakers at the table. Still, attendance jumped to nearly 200 people per day in July.

Feeling that the outdoor program had closed too early at the end of its first summer, the staff determined to stay open outside as long as possible during the autumn of 2000. Experience eventually taught them that the appropriate schedule for the outdoor program was early April to late October.

The following winter, youth participation in the year-round programs was strong, much of it through organized sports. As the staff had hoped, there was significant crossover by participants. Those coming to play Monday night girls' soccer or Wednesday night boys' and men's soccer began to use the rest of the Beacon Center's programs in the school. Soccer players from the outdoor program joined Saturday basketball, Friday night American football and Sunset Park Basketball League, and also got involved in youth employment, the learning academy, clubs and school-aged child care.

Some of the summer teens participated in the counselor-in-training youth internship component of Neighborhood Center, which began to grow. They worked on newsletters and as soccer coaches and referees, and helped with registration and attendance. But involvement stopped there; they did not yet participate with Beacon-wide staff development programs and other events. Additionally, most had difficulty producing the documentation necessary to join the Summer Youth Employment Program, and therefore were often excluded from jobs and the accompanying financial rewards.

They began to think more broadly of the yard as a kind of community plaza, similar to a town square in Central America.

YEAR THREE: GROWING FAST, PROTECTING PARTICIPANTS, ENCOURAGING GIRLS

In April 2001, the start of the third year of the summer program, the staff painted over the winter's graffiti, worked with young people to paint new designs and helped to get garbage cans installed throughout the yard. The ever-expanding outdoor program opened with soccer, volleyball, basketball, the supervised play yard, dance and more. A Mother's Day festival in May focused on gardening and planting flowers in three different areas of the yard.

The summer of 2001 set attendance records for both a single month (July, with 4,219 encounters) and for the year (September 2000 to August 2001, with 23,215 encounters). This was nearly double the attendance levels of the previous year. Total registration exceeded 2000 people.

The schedule was expanded for the yard to be open every weeknight, Monday through Friday, primarily to help make Neighborhood Center a viable site for Summer Youth Employment workers. Given the number of teens attending summer school, there was tremendous demand for late afternoon and evening work hours, and the employment program stretched to include 18 teen workers.

Soccer continued to be popular. Participants played the usual intramural games for various age groups in the schoolyard and now started transporting the girls' soccer group to fields a few miles away in Red Hook for practices. The staff continued to partner with the Brooklyn Patriots Soccer Club, which sponsored travel teams and opened up avenues for players to join them.

Much of the growth and positive change to Neighborhood Center that year came about serendipitously, because of adverse situations that the staff turned into opportunities. For example, due to construction, the classroom space was unexpectedly unavailable in the summer of 2001, which left the large Beacon day camp without a home. So the center staffed the schoolyard during the day to assist day camp groups with activities. They soon realized that the warmer hours between the end of day camp and the beginning of soccer, volleyball and basketball, from 3 to 5p.m., were perfect for baseball and softball, slower games typically played in the heat of the day.

The staff decided to offer organized softball, beginning with a league for boys and girls under the age of 13. This activity proved to be extremely important to many children. Eddy, 10, says, "I didn't know how to play softball good. Then I started playing and now I'm a good player. I kept on practicing and then—'cause the ball was bigger it was easier to hit—I learned how to swing."

Dealing with issues generated by forces outside the confines of the schoolyard stole some of the time of Neighborhood Center staff. Local vendors continued to sell their food in the yard, but the police frequently ticketed them for lack of licenses. The Beacon Center staff tried to mediate between the two, and to help the vendors get licenses, but ultimately the police intervention resulted in the schoolyard having fewer vendors.

Meanwhile, threats of gang violence continued to creep into the yard, but the informal community networks that had been established there helped to prevent any injuries. One day in July, staff learned that a gang planned to attack a Honduran teen who was at that moment playing soccer. They realized that Latin King gang members were finding ways to enter the schoolyard without signing in and were already surrounding the soccer area. Calling 911, they quickly escorted the young man into the school and locked the door. Police escorted the player home, and he left the city the following day.

In general, though, people nursing quarrels respected the safety of the schoolyard for the sake of the growing number of younger children using it every day, many of whom were the younger brothers and sisters of the quarreling teens and adults.

Threats of gang violence continued to creep into the yard, but the informal community networks that had been established there helped to prevent any injuries.

In a city struggling with obesity and insufficient athletic opportunities for young women, it is hard to overestimate the importance of young girls having the chance to play and enjoy sports.

Through all of this, the staff was trying to tackle an even more complicated issue. From the beginning of the program, it was clear the athletic offerings were not serving the needs of teenaged girls. Two evenings in the gym during the winter of 2000-2001 had been set aside for girls' basketball, but almost none participated. Other than a few confident girls who played on the boys teams, almost no girls had played in the outdoor programs, either.

Some girls and their parents had requested that Neighborhood Center create a girls' soccer program. Staff decided the best way to build a solid group of athletic girls would be to start young, so they started soccer activities in the school gym for girls in the after school programs during the school year. Three different age groups—7 and 8, 8 and 9, and 10 and 11—each had hour-long soccer sessions. Slowly, a pool of 25 female players, mostly between 8 and 11 years old, grew. When outdoor programming opened in the spring of 2001, there were enough girls to provide a regular time on the big field two evenings a week. Girls were also given the opportunity to join an under-12 girls' travel team sponsored by the Center for Family Life, which was already sponsoring four boys' teams.

A local group also organized a mostly female dance activity, practicing for *quincién* celebrations. Staff set up daily volleyball, immediately attracting mothers and teenaged girls. More mothers began to bring children to the play yard. The regular use of the sprinklers proved to be a major new activity, allowing wet children to use the slides as water slides, and requiring a new staffing position to properly supervise the area. Social work staff were brought into the yard to be available to parents for discussion and referrals.

In a city struggling with obesity and insufficient athletic opportunities for young women, it is hard to overestimate the importance of young girls having the chance to play and enjoy sports. When Jennie, now 10 years old and a regular participant since the winter of 2000, was asked for her favorite memory of the program, she was quick to respond: "When the girls first started playing. That's it." The first thing she started doing at Neighborhood Center, Jennie said, was playing soccer. "I saw people playing soccer and I asked my mom to bring me. I thought it was a good thing for me to do, playing soccer." The cadre of girls grew slowly over a four-year period, within a cultural context that may not be supportive within some countries of origin, or, for that matter, within many New York City neighborhoods. Yet the families of many girls have strongly supported the program.

SEPTEMBER 11th: THE COMMUNITY RESPONDS

The attacks on the World Trade Center in September 2001 shifted the population of Neighborhood Center significantly toward an outdoor culture more influenced by families with young children. More families turned to the center for a sense of community, and perhaps togetherness, after the trauma of the terrorist attacks.

The staff had just returned from its annual two-week vacation in early September. Neighborhood Center remained closed for two days after the World Trade Center attacks, but it then reopened on a regular schedule. Staff organized a candlelight memorial in one corner of the large rectangle where a raised gardening plot afforded the opportunity for a ceremonial tree-planting. Participants addressed the crowd, recited poetry and sang. Attendance seemed to be large, given the circumstances, and very orderly. In the following days unsupervised children who were regular participants created a large chalk mural, and the Beacon's volunteers wrote and drew pieces for Neighborhood Center's *Community News* publication.

Perhaps people felt close to the 9/11 experience in Neighborhood Center because the program took

place outdoors, practically within sight of the disaster. The twin towers were once easily visible from the roof of the school or the hill in nearby Sunset Park, and the smoke was a constant presence over the community and schoolyard for weeks afterward.

The 9/11 attacks became part of the ongoing identity of Neighborhood Center. The memorial ceremony was repeated in 2002 and 2003. A community resident painted a memorial mural on the wall behind the commemorative tree. In the spring of 2002 young teens invited to draw ideas for a Neighborhood Center logo drew cityscapes with the World Trade Center towers and the words “Neighborhood Center.”

The attendance data from October 2001 onward reveal a surprising and dramatic shift. Initially attendance dropped, and then slowly grew back to its earlier level, but with a population based more on family groups and less on singles, with more women and young children, and more parents. The earlier dominance of young adult men and older teen boys changed to more of a family atmosphere. This transformation was a general trend that had been accelerated by the 9/11 tragedy.

Perhaps 9/11 catalyzed a stronger feeling of community. Or perhaps the participation of families and multiple generations—young and old alike—had simply reached a critical mass.

YEAR FOUR: A BALANCING ACT

In early 2002, Neighborhood Center joined a national learning cooperative of programs seeking to develop the family-strengthening aspects of their youth development programs. Staff participated in weekend retreats and conference calls that helped them organize their youth programs to be more family-friendly. They also began to produce professional literature on the characteristics of family-strengthening youth development.

These discussions made apparent the Neighborhood Center model as a unique opportunity to respond to the original needs of parents as expressed in the 1999 Sunset Park Neighborhood Survey. Clearly this center, or parts of it, could be replicated in other schoolyards and parks in urban settings.

That summer, a large school construction project surrounded the school with scaffolding all summer long, blocking sun from the gardening areas, handball courts and walkways, and creating a gloomy atmosphere for much of the schoolyard. Nonetheless, teams of Summer Youth Employment workers created new community arts activities to supplement the sports programs. They organized arts, literacy and gardening projects in the schoolyard and in a nearby community garden, culminating in mid-August in a community arts festival that featured murals, a photography exhibition and activities for children, teens and adults.

When Neighborhood Center received a very large donation of books, the staff opened a lending library, which created a gathering place for children and parents who may otherwise have had difficulty finding a suitable activity. That September, the library served as a site for Reading Is Fundamental literacy activities and each young person received a free book. This sparked new interest among parents for books for preschoolers, and the activities became a model for regular literacy programs over the following months and years.

The center’s literacy coordinator encouraged participants to write about the schoolyard, and published some of the work in a community newsletter that fall. “Mi nombre es Cristina y tengo 9 años,” wrote one youngster. “Me gusta estar en el parque. Mi papá juega soccer, yo como pizza y leo libros. Me gusta el libro de los dinosaurios.” (“My name is Cristina and I am 9 years old. My father plays soccer, I eat pizza and read books. I like the dinosaur book.”)

*Perhaps people
felt close to
the 9/11
experience in
Neighborhood
Center because
the program
took place
outdoors,
practically
within sight of
the disaster.*

The theme of family participation was prominent in the words of the parents. They expressed their gratitude, their likes and dislikes and recommendations for changes. "I think that this park is important for the kids and parents of this area, because it is close to their homes and it is safe for them," one parent wrote. "It's really clean and open for the kids to have fun, play and run around."

Many parents were happy to be able to relax in a community setting with their children. "Pasamos el tiempo entretenidos jugando cartas. Mientras nuestros niños juegan en el parque. Me agrada estar en este ambiente." ("We pass the time enjoying playing cards. Meanwhile our children play in the park. It is pleasing to be in this atmosphere.")

Critiques were sometimes very specific:

Antes que nada deseo de todo corazón que las actividades realizadas aquí duren siempre y no solamente en el verano. También si se pudiera aumentar estas actividades, incluyendo un torneo de baloncesto, boxeo, atletismo y también competencia de canto, poesía o de dibujo mas avanzado. Un lugar también especial para las bicicletas. Mayor control para los niños que desobedecen las reglas y un mayor número de vigilantes para mas control de la gente, y que las luces de la escuela esten prendidas toda la noche sin interrupciones. Es todo y gracias por hacer este esfuerzo para la supervisión de los niños.

[First I desire with all my heart that the activities created here last always and not only in the summer. Also if one could augment the activities to include tournaments in basketball, boxing, athletics and also skills in singing, poetry or more advanced drawing. Also, a place especially for bicycles. Greater control for the children that disobey the rules and a greater number of staff for more control of the people, and that the lights of the school shine all night without interruption. That's all, and thanks for making this effort to supervise the children.]

Parents had developed a sense of ownership for Neighborhood Center, and they had strong opinions about its offerings. They wanted organized sports tournaments but also more athletic activities for younger children. And they wanted tight enforcement of the schoolyard rules. The staff tried to meet these requests, which resulted in less playing time for older teens and young adults.

The older teens and adults continued to use the space, however. On most outdoor nights, after the program was closed and the soccer goals were taken down, they continued to play in the dark. The lack of field space in New York City creates tremendous demand. The enthusiasm of this group of players kept the outdoor program running even on cold October nights. Dedicated players helped create the critical mass necessary to give a consistent presence to the outdoor program in almost any weather, which created a sense of protection from crime and encouraged others to enter the schoolyard.

YEAR FIVE AND BEYOND

Neighborhood Center continued to grow and evolve in 2003 and the summers that followed. Athletic programs were packed, and younger players won more time in the school gym. A grant to improve the lending library meant the center was able to hire a librarian and purchase two large double-sided bookshelves on wheels. When the program moved outdoors in the spring, the library was set up in the small play yard and became the center of a variety of activities, including a regular art contest and gardening activities, that fit in well in the space and helped keep the area calm.

In early March 2003, staff and volunteers worked madly to distribute a truckload of topsoil to eight different gardening plots. By early spring children, teens and parents were sprouting seeds, transferring seedlings to the plots, and watering and weeding.

Another grant allowed Neighborhood Center to pay a stipend to summer youth workers who were

Parents had developed a sense of ownership for Neighborhood Center, and they had strong opinions about its offerings.

ineligible for the city-funded program. For the first time, the center could pay many of their usual volunteers to run the community arts project, and integrate Neighborhood Center teens with other summer youth workers from around the neighborhood. The program was also now able to provide stipends to teens and young adults helping run the summer soccer tournament with the Brooklyn Patriots Soccer Club in Prospect Park.

In addition, staff found it difficult to attend to the large numbers of young children spending time in the schoolyard unaccompanied by a parent or other adult, so they began to enforce a rule that children under age 10 must be accompanied by a responsible caregiver.

That summer, Neighborhood Center had the highest registration yet. But to a large extent, longstanding problems did not go away; they were simply removed from sight while the program was in session. The latest generation of the so-called lost boys, along with a few girls, continued to spend time late at night and at other off-hours unsupervised in the park, and they continued to get into trouble. The staff often heard complaints from neighbors about incidents that occurred when the center wasn't operating.

A public urban space is only as secure as the community that attends to it. At the end of the summer, while the staff was on its usual two-week break, a school door was left unlocked and a group of young people heavily vandalized the school. Within three hours, a custodian called the police, who arrived in riot gear with search dogs to find smashed computers and bottles and stolen equipment. The length of time this highly visible incident went on revealed that when center programs were not in session there was a shocking absence of responsible adult supervision in the nearby schoolyard.

Much of the rubberized surface of the playground was torn up during the vacation as well, so the principal closed the play yard and attempted to prod the Department of Education into making repairs. When the program reopened in September the play yard was unusable for a time.

The community was shocked by these incidents and concerned about the future of Neighborhood Center. It was clearer than ever that parents were still afraid to come to the schoolyard, or have their children attend, without some greater assurance of safety. Staff brought together the school's principal and parent coordinator, Center for Family Life staff, local residents and the police of the 72nd Precinct to make a security plan for the schoolyard. This included locking the yard at 9 p.m. each night, and in the end, there emerged a sense of closer cooperation among all these stakeholders.

Neighborhood Center has never had the capacity to staff the schoolyard during the many days and evenings when the program is not in session, including summer weekends. Yet they had learned that such a vulnerable public space could only be truly secure through frequent, active use and the full and constant engagement of the larger community. As a resource valued by thousands, supervision comes not from the employees of one institution—Neighborhood Center—but from the Sunset Park community itself.

CONCLUSION

The Neighborhood Center that emerged on the P.S. 503/506 schoolyard was not the program originally envisioned in 1999. Rather, it grew from circumstances that were not fully understood at the outset and became something much more substantial: a community environment for positive outdoor culture in a neighborhood that desperately needed such a place.

The community plaza is a highly visible, very rare open space centrally located in the midst of thousands of families living in cramped quarters—families that include a very high proportion of young people. The programming itself—the athletics, bookmobile, gardens, youth internships and

They had learned that such a vulnerable public space could only be truly secure through frequent, active use and the full and constant engagement of the larger community.

much more—set in such a valuable and prominent location, serves multiple generations and engages groups of different backgrounds, ethnicities and interests.

New York City has dozens of communities where working-class and low-income parents and grandparents struggle to balance raising young children and teenagers with their long work hours and other responsibilities. These are often the same neighborhoods where there are large concentrations of single-parent families, immigrants who work in poorly paid service-sector jobs, and overcrowded housing.

The residents of these neighborhoods work to hold their families together despite the stress. Yet like parents anywhere, they want to know where their teenagers and younger children are after school, they want their children to be safe from drugs, gangs and violence, and they want them to grow up healthy.

The Neighborhood Center model of a staffed, controlled and multifaceted community plaza in a large schoolyard helps families achieve all of these goals, and without an extraordinary commitment of funds. Ultimately, the Center for Family Life budgeted just \$125,000 per year to staff and manage the program, and found other resources to improve the physical space. Of course, with greater resources the program could be significantly larger and open more hours, including weekends. But even at the relatively modest scale described in this case study, the center's importance in the lives of hundreds of Sunset Park families is clear.

Over the years, programming and participation shifted from a large group of young men involved in sports toward a more family-friendly mix of programs that attracted younger children and teens as well as their parents and caregivers. The growing diversity of activities—supervised sprinklers, a lending library, a puppet theater, arts and crafts tables, a variety of sports for different ages, and gardening plots—helped to create a more diverse community plaza.

The magic of the schoolyard is that it allows a unique opportunity for families, different age groups and other community members to recreate together and be visible to one another. An entire family can be in the same environment, even as each member participates in a different activity. As the 12-year-old girl plays soccer, her younger brother plays in the sprinkler, her father plays volleyball, her grandmother chats with neighbors. People can circulate from one activity to another, as at a fair.

Teenagers continue to play a visible leadership role in nearly all of the activities, and Neighborhood Center remains true to its original purpose of youth development and working with marginalized young people. The center manages youth internship and employment programs that provide stipends and leadership opportunities for dozens of young people each year. Staff also offer tutoring and mentoring services directly to hard-to-reach teens.

And the younger preteen children, mostly boys who in past years would have spent their days after school wandering the streets with friends or watching television, also find a welcoming, supervised and attractive place to spend their time at Neighborhood Center.

There are scores of underused schoolyards in the neighborhoods of New York City—spaces like the P.S. 503/506 schoolyard as it was in the 1990s, when a small number of people dominated the environment and created a sense of insecurity and potential violence.

Over the last 10 years, the terms “family support,” “youth development” and “community building” have been used together to define a new professional field focused on building social organization in neighborhoods. Given the complex needs presented by urban neighborhoods for outdoor life, parental access to the youth environment, community recreation and culture, and the strengthening of networks and friendships among young people and parents, these often poorly used urban schoolyards and parks offer an extraordinary opportunity.

They are a valuable community resource that can and should be tapped to vastly improve the outdoor social life of families and entire neighborhoods.

The magic of the schoolyard is that it allows a unique opportunity for families, different age groups and other community members to recreate together and be visible to one another.

Also available from the Center for New York City Affairs at The New School

CHILD WELFARE WATCH, Volume 14

PRESSURES AND POSSIBILITIES: SUPPORTING FAMILIES AND CHILDREN AT HOME

A look at the city's preventive family support system at a key time of transition. The job of frontline preventive family support is changing. City child abuse and neglect investigators are referring more cases and officials are pushing for faster and more positive outcomes for families where the risk of foster care looms. Published Summer 2007.



CHILD WELFARE WATCH, Volume 13

HALF FULL, HALF EMPTY: CHILDREN AND FAMILIES WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

A report on the urgent need for attention to education services and advocacy for foster care children with developmental disabilities. A persistent lack of coordination between state and city agencies, and between school and child welfare systems, has left many vulnerable children without access to quality services. Published Winter 2006 .



“THERE’S NO SUCH PLACE”

THE FAMILY ASSESSMENT PROGRAM, PINS AND THE LIMITS OF SUPPORT SERVICES FOR FAMILIES WITH TEENS IN NEW YORK CITY

This special report tells the stories of New York City families with troubled teenagers. Recent reforms have diverted thousands from Family Court to support services. Yet spiraling juvenile arrests and increased foster care placements due to delinquency are signs the changes haven't made a substantial impact on issues faced by struggling city teens. Published January 2007.

These and other publications are available electronically on the Center for New York City Affairs website, www.newschool.edu/milano/nyc affairs. To order printed copies, or to join our mailing list, please call 212.229.5418 or email centernyc@newschool.edu.

Center for New York City Affairs on the radio

FEET IN TWO WORLDS: LINKING ETHNIC MEDIA WITH PUBLIC RADIO

A collaboration between the Center for New York City Affairs and WNYC, New York Public Radio, *Feet in Two Worlds* brings new voices into the discussions of immigration, globalization and transnational cultures. Covering ethnic communities in your city is one thing. Covering your city from an immigrant perspective is something else altogether. Through training and mentoring immigrant journalists, the award-winning, *Feet in Two Worlds* project gives public radio listeners a unique window into the lives of immigrant communities. To read more about the project and listen to the radio stories online, go to www.newschool.edu/milano/nyc affairs/feet2worlds.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

For years, the schoolyard on 60th Street in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, was a hangout for local teens using drugs, drinking and holding gang meetings. But today it is a social hub for families in the working-class neighborhood. Today this community plaza draws residents of all ages who come to garden or play basketball or music. The transformation of the Sunset Park schoolyard is much more than the culmination of a decade of work by the Center for Family Life. It is also a blueprint for reclaiming the city's many overlooked and poorly used urban schoolyards and parks.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg's ambitious new PlaNYC 2030, which includes scores of initiatives for making New York a more livable city, proposes opening 290 schoolyards to neighborhood residents when school is not in session. The story of Sunset Park and the schoolyard at PS 503/506 offers essential lessons for such efforts to reclaim badly needed public space—as well as for the broader work of family support, youth development and community building in urban America.

MILANO THE NEW SCHOOL FOR MANAGEMENT AND URBAN POLICY

Progressive, current and socially responsible, Milano offers degree programs in professions that shape the way organizations work, communities function and people live. For more information call 212.229.5400 ext 1130, email milanoadmissions@newschool.edu or visit us on the web at www.milano.newschool.edu.

72 Fifth Avenue, 6th Floor, New York, NY 10011

CENTER FOR NEW YORK CITY AFFAIRS
THE NEW SCHOOL

NONPROFIT ORG
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
THE NEW SCHOOL