



# Oakland Unified School District

## A Schoolyard Forest Case Study

Located in the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) faces many of the same challenges as other large, urban school districts across the United States: funding constraints, aging school infrastructure, and intradistrict inequities. Despite these headwinds, OUSD is building an exemplary schoolyard greening program. OUSD provides an inspiring example of the ways in which both systems change and schoolyard greening can be achieved through an interdisciplinary, collaborative approach that emphasizes bridge-building across departments and with internal and external stakeholders.

### District-Wide Vision

Oakland Unified School District’s commitment to schoolyard greening is memorialized in a 2019 school board policy, BP 7110.1, Development of Living Schoolyards, which outlines the district’s vision and the steps it intends to take to build living schoolyards at all OUSD campuses. To achieve this ambitious goal, the district has begun to formally institutionalize its living schoolyards program, which includes: the creation of design guidelines for living schoolyards;

the building of its Central Kitchen, Education Center, and Instructional Garden/Farm (called “The Center”) to serve as the physical hub of district-wide schoolyard greening, gardening, and nutrition programs; and the establishment of a School Gardens and Living Schoolyards Program Manager position to ensure that the district’s living schoolyards are under the purview of a staff member with dedicated time to implement the district’s board resolution.



#### DISTRICT INFORMATION

- **Name:** Oakland Unified School District
- **Location:** Oakland, California
- **Climate:** Mediterranean
- **Type:** Large, Urban, Public School District
- **Grades:** K-12
- **Number of Schools:** 82
- **Number of Students:** 46,600
- **% of Students Qualifying for FRPMs:** 72.4%\*

\*FRPMs: Free and Reduced-Price Meals

The Living Schoolyards Program Manager and The Center provide district-wide support for living schoolyards projects. At individual school sites, stipended Environment Food Garden (EFG) Champions plan, build, and maintain living schoolyards and gardens. EFG Champions are most often teachers but also include parents, instructional assistants, front office staff, and after-school instructors. They steward living schoolyards and gardens by growing diverse and healthy garden and share the garden bounty and seasonal produce with cafeterias, classrooms, and the community. They also educate the school community on concerns related to the environment, food, and gardening, engaging and collaborating with the school site community and the district's Education and Community Programming Team at The Center to do so. More than 90% of OUSD schools currently have EFG Champions, with many schools having two people holding the role. Many district schools also receive educational programming and stewardship from FoodCorps service members.

The School Gardens and Living Schoolyards Program Manager, The Center, and the EFG Champions are members of a collaborative, interdepartmental committee known as the Garden Council. The Garden Council is composed of representatives from the garden program, facilities, buildings and grounds, risk management, and sustainability departments. The Council provides a forum for personal and professional relationship building, as well as a platform for reviewing living schoolyard projects and policies. The Council has been instrumental in building trust and communication across formally-siloed district departments, identifying and resolving barriers to schoolyard greening, and giving a voice to teacher and student greening champions.



Saplings growing in a greenhouse at OUSD's The Center.



**All OUSD's school grounds will have living schoolyards that support 21st Century education, promote children's health, well-being and joy and function as ecologically rich community schools that connect children and their neighborhoods to the natural world right outside their classroom door, every day.**

Board Policy 7110.1, Development of Living Schoolyards  
OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT



A rainwater catchment and infiltration swale surrounded by trees at OUSD's César E. Chávez Campus.

The Living Schoolyards Program Manager and the team at The Center are currently working to create the institutional resources necessary to build living schoolyards at scale. A school garden toolkit, first published in 2021, provides EFG Champions and schools with access to a planting calendar, garden supplies, and repair and maintenance rubrics and request forms, among many other resources. In 2023, The Center published comprehensive living schoolyard design guidelines, written collaboratively with other OUSD department representatives, community partners, the Trust for Public Land, Bay Tree Design Inc., and Green Schoolyards America. These guidelines embrace a comprehensive approach to schoolyard greening with an emphasis on trees, gardens, natural materials, and permeable surfaces. Since its publication, the document has been actively used in all OUSD schoolyard greening projects and serves as the goalposts and guidance for the district's ambitious living schoolyard plans.

## From Asphalt to Living Schoolyards

Following larger regional and national trends, the living schoolyards movement within Oakland Unified School District began in earnest around 2000, at which point a handful of passionate teachers and staff members recognized a need and built the district's first school gardens.

Over the course of the next decade, more gardens and garden advocates sprouted across the district. In 2009, the district hired a full-time staff member to manage its growing garden program. The next year, the district board approved a vegetation policy, which has since served as the formal guidelines for school site garden construction, use, and maintenance.

During the 2010s, shifts in policies, attitudes, and available resources continued to transform the once-scraggy garden program into a full-fledged district institution, with the blossoming of instructional, food, and equity garden programs. A revised district wellness policy (2014), for example, emphasized the benefits of schoolyard gardens and greenspaces as a means to improve student health and academic outcomes, providing additional district support for the garden program.



*Students at OUSD's César E. Chávez Campus play on the natural playstructure of their recently-renovated living schoolyard.*



*OUSD's César E. Chávez Campus features an outdoor classroom surrounded by large planter boxes and growing trees.*

With this momentum, in 2017, OUSD's schoolyard greening champions partnered with the Trust for Public Land and Green Schoolyards America to launch the district's first comprehensive living schoolyard initiative, including four pilot projects. While many of the district's gardens are composed of raised garden beds built among traditional asphalt schoolyards, these new transformational projects involved the wholesale rebuilding of asphalt schoolyards from the ground up, with the installation of shade trees, gardens, permeable surfaces, play elements and seating areas made of natural materials decided through a participatory design process with the school communities.



*Logs provide seating in this living schoolyard at OUSD's Markham Elementary School.*

In 2019, a coalition of nonprofit partners, advocates, community members, students, and teachers successfully worked with OUSD staff and the school board to pass a pair of complementary school board policies, BP 7110.1, Development of Living Schoolyards, and BP 6142.5, Environmental and Climate Change Literacy, which respectively solidified the district's commitment to building green, climate-resilient schoolyards and to teaching its students the concepts and ideas they need to become climate literate citizens.

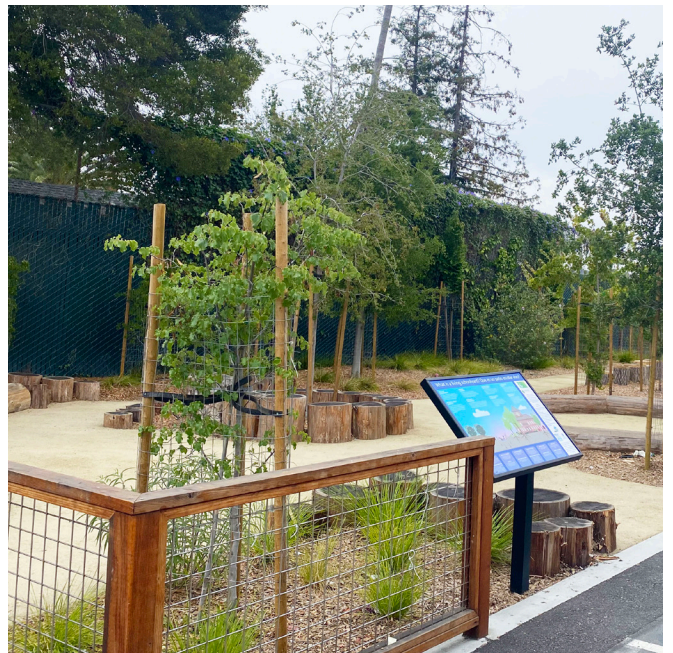
In 2020, the district released its Facilities Master Plan, a document that serves as a roadmap for district facilities improvement spending and renovation priorities over the next decade. For the first time in district history, the Facilities Master Plan includes a chapter on the living schoolyards program, identifying the building of greener schoolyards as a facilities improvement need to align with the district's strategic goal to improve energy efficiency, climate resilience, and sustainability. The district's living schoolyards program is included in the Facilities Master Plan's \$110,000,000 identified need for Energy / Resiliency / Sustainability improvements across the district.

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As the steward of 505 acres of land in Oakland, OUSD will build on its thriving Living Schoolyard initiative across the district.

Facilities Master Plan (2020)  
OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

In conjunction with the release of the Facilities Master Plan, Oakland voters passed Measure Y in 2020, authorizing OUSD to issue \$735 million in general obligation bonds to repair, upgrade, expand, and retrofit existing school buildings to improve school facilities, following the blueprint of the Master Plan. Buoyed by this additional funding and the district-level support for the living schoolyards program, OUSD plans to build living schoolyards transformations into its larger facilities capital projects, “coupling living schoolyards projects with other major renovations or improvements in order to maximize efficiency and minimize costs.”

Even more recently, the district has partnered with KABOOM!, The Bhusri Family Foundation, and Eat. Learn. Play. to renovate the schoolyards of six high-need schools with more trees, nature play areas, and refurbished gardens, among other schoolyard improvements. Moreover, Eat. Learn. Play. has committed \$50 million to ensure that all OUSD students are provided with nutritious meals, strong academic support, and improved schoolyards and opportunities to be active and participate in youth sports. Some of this funding will support OUSD's Central Kitchen, Education Center, and Instructional Garden/Farm in becoming fully operational with the goal of providing over 6 million healthy, cooked-from-scratch school meals every year to the district's nearly 47,000 students and 82 schools.



*A sign at OUSD's Markham Elementary School details the benefits of the school's living schoolyard.*

## From Planning to Planting

Schoolyard greening and gardening projects at OUSD begin as either larger, often district-initiated, major renovation projects in which internal and external stakeholders create comprehensive school site plans that include living schoolyards, or as smaller community-initiated projects in which champions — from students to teachers to custodians to administrators — identify and write project proposals to the district.

The larger district-initiated projects often rely on partnerships with experienced external nonprofit partners and funders to engage the school community, plan and build much-needed living schoolyards in collaboration with the district facilities department. Its first four comprehensive living schoolyards projects were the result of this approach in which collaboration with the Trust for Public Land allowed the district to acquire the funding and know-how to build world-class living schoolyards at César E. Chávez Campus, Melrose Leadership Academy, Markham Elementary, and Bridges Leadership Academy.

The smaller community-initiated schoolyard greening projects, on the other hand, provide avenues for students and teachers to identify and carry out schoolyard greening within their existing schoolyards.

Many of OUSD's school gardens are the result of individual EFG Champions who advocated on behalf of individual school sites through formal and informal channels. With the growth of the district's green schoolyards program in the last 10 years, however, EFG Champions are now able to work within robust institutional frameworks to plan and build greening projects with approval and support from the district. For example, the interdepartmental Garden Council provides feedback, advice, and resources for the advancement of the project while The Center provides long-term programmatic support.

## Maintenance

At OUSD, maintenance is a shared responsibility among district buildings and grounds staff, custodians, EFG Champions, students, volunteers, and sometimes nonprofit partners.

The district currently has 12 gardeners who work throughout the district on each of OUSD's facilities on routine maintenance tasks such as mowing, weed-whacking, and occasional pruning. Each gardener spends approximately 4 hours per week at each campus. This is not enough to do the level of maintenance needed for all living schoolyards and



*A bird's-eye view of OUSD's César E. Chávez Campus, a transformational project completed in 2021.*

gardens across the district. Therefore, many of the responsibilities for maintaining OUSD's school gardens fall primarily on the EFG Champions at each school site, who work with classes to plant, water, harvest, and maintain each garden plot.

Custodians usually carry out tasks such as picking up trash and sweeping mulch, while major repairs such as irrigation leaks and play equipment and site furniture repairs are carried out by the buildings and grounds department, which prioritizes tasks across the district based on safety and other factors.

Some schools have partnerships with nonprofit organizations that are able to carry out some of the maintenance tasks, such as planting, weeding, soil amendments, and spreading mulch, with students and volunteers.

## Funding

OUSD's Central Kitchen, Education Center, and Instructional Garden/Farm ("The Center"), including its programming teams and supplies, is primarily funded by public and private grants. The district also partners with organizations such as the Trust for Public Land and FoodCorps to support the design, implementation, management, and educational use of the living schoolyards and school gardens. Finally, as described in the 2020 Facilities Master Plan, living schoolyards projects receive funding support at the district level. Annual funding needs for the district's living schoolyards program is approximately \$1.5 million as of 2023.

### CALIFORNIA SCHOOLYARD FOREST SYSTEM

The California Schoolyard Forest System™ seeks to create schoolyard forests across PreK-12 public school grounds statewide to directly shade and protect students from extreme heat and rising temperatures due to climate change. This initiative was founded by Green Schoolyards America in partnership with the California Department of Education, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, and Ten Strands.

For more information, visit: [greenschoolyards.org/ca-forests](https://greenschoolyards.org/ca-forests)



**CALIFORNIA**  
**Schoolyard**  
**Forest System™**



**green**  
**schoolyards**  
**america**



### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Oakland Unified School District (2023). [Central Kitchen, Instructional Farm, and Education Center](#).
- Oakland Unified School District Board of Education (2019). [BP 7110.1: Development of Living Schoolyards](#).
- Oakland Unified School District Board of Education (2019). [BP 6142.5, Environmental and Climate Change Literacy](#).
- Oakland Unified School District (2020). [Facilities Master Plan](#).
- Oakland Unified School District, The Center, [Living Schoolyards Guidelines \(2022\)](#).

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The contents of this case study were adapted from a presentation developed and given by Oakland Unified School District's Kat Romo, School Gardens and Living Schoolyards Program Manager, The Center Education and Community Programming Team, and from presentations by Roland Broach, Executive Director, Custodial Services and Grounds, and Mark Cavalli, Coordinator, Buildings and Grounds, at [Green Schoolyards America's Community of Practice for Schoolyard Forests](#) on March 21, 2023.

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