

STANFORD UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

CASE: 2006-8
DATE: 12/14/06

Where Do The Children Play?
The Urban Spaces Project at PS X¹

The neighborhood schools model, in which children attend schools in their community, closely couples schools with their geographic neighbors. Good schools make good neighbors. They paint murals, plant gardens and hold carnivals and fairs. This relationship is complicated in stratified urban communities in which school choice, private schooling and gerrymandered districts result in schools that do not necessarily serve children in their geographic area. As such, schools and neighborhoods are decoupled—no longer sharing the same interests. This presents school organizations with a unique set of challenges and expectations. The events at one small school in Brooklyn, involving a playground, a changing community, and a lot of garbage, illustrate this.

From Concrete to Astroturf

In the spring of 2005, I was invited to a meeting regarding a grant to renovate the playground at PS X², a K-8 public school in New York City. At the time, I was the director of PS X's after-school program, which was run in partnership with a large, reputable Community Based Organization (CBO) in New York City. The purpose of the meeting was to elicit support for a grant from the Partnership for Public Space (PPS) for which the president of the school's teachers' union was applying. PPS, through their Urban Spaces program, performs dramatic renovations to public school yards. At the time of the meeting, the PS X schoolyard was a drab slab of asphalt with 3 basketball hoops. This schoolyard served as a recreation space for both of the schools (one middle, one elementary) housed in the PS X building. If awarded the grant, the Urban Spaces program would transform the schoolyard to include a track, Astroturf field, jungle gym, tree-lined picnic area, outdoor classroom and basketball court.

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² In the interest of protecting all involved parties and organizations names have been changed.

Present at the meeting were the principals and parent coordinators of both schools and the head custodian. Everyone agreed that a new yard would help to alleviate the numerous behavioral problems that had arisen from unstructured, poorly supervised recess periods. Simultaneously, the new yard would give the schools something to be proud of and connect them to the neighborhood. For the after-school program, the playground would help to fill programming gaps by allowing groups to spend activity periods outside. With all of us on board, the teachers' union president scheduled a follow-up meeting with PPS. At the meeting, we pleaded our case to the representatives, stressing how underserved our students were. PPS required a specific partnership commitment from the head custodian and a community based partner. The meeting ended and one month later, in June of 2005, we were awarded the grant.

Planning began in September. The Urban Spaces program uses a participatory design model that involves students in the planning and design of the playground. Three classes from the elementary school were involved. In addition, the CBO's after-school program provided a group of middle-school students to work on the project once a week during after-school hours. The CBO also contacted parents and a few joined the planning process. In mid-December, funding for the project was threatened because of cuts to the city budget. PPS asked the Executive Director of the CBO to write a letter to the Mayor to elicit his support. Funding was reinstated and the plans for the renovated yard were completed in February of 2006. At the same time, the teachers' union president, who until this time had been coordinating the project, accepted an Assistant Principal position at a nearby school.

Soon after, as per Urban Spaces protocol, the plans were presented to the community at a PTA meeting in February. One week prior to this meeting, PS X staff members put fliers in the mailboxes of homes adjacent to the school inviting neighbors to the approval meeting. Present at the meeting were: a representative from the local Councilmember's office; a representative from the Borough President's office; a representative from the local Community Board; representatives from the Partnership for Public Space; school personnel and a few parents. There were *no* community members from the residences around the school present at the meeting. At the meeting the plans were approved, but PPS was asked to do a follow-up presentation at the Community Board Parks Committee meeting. On April 19th, two weeks before construction was supposed to begin, a representative of PPS presented the plans for the renovated school yard to the Community Board Parks Committee. This is where things turned ugly.

The Community Board was severely critical of PPS for not consulting sufficiently with residents of the immediate neighborhood before building the park. Community Board members raised concerns about kids climbing the fences at night and about noise from the playground, particularly from the basketball courts. They stated that no one had received any fliers or notification about an approval meeting. Committee members were outraged that they had not been included in the process until two weeks before construction was to start. They wanted more input into the playground hours of operation, maintenance and usage. Their opinions were summarized in a scathing article entitled, "City Playing It Fast & Loose with P.S. X Playground Redux? Committee Says Slow Down and Get Input" that appeared in the neighborhood's free, weekly local publication. As a result of the meeting the plans to build the playground were halted.

One School, Many Neighborhoods

In order to understand why this happened, it's important to look at the history of PS X and the surrounding community. PS X was constructed during the 1950's in conjunction with the building of two large housing projects. These housing projects were located between two neighborhoods: one was traditionally Italian and the other was home to affluent professionals. Over the past 2 decades the neighborhoods surrounding these housing projects have become increasingly gentrified. An article in the *New York Times* in 2003 stated that according to census data, this area was one of the smallest geographic neighborhoods in New York City with the largest economic disparity. PS X was designed and districted to serve low-income students. More than 90% of the students that attend the PS X elementary school live in the local housing projects. Indeed, the district is drawn so deliberately that the condominiums directly across the street from PS X are districted to PS Y, a higher performing school located one block away.

Part of the problem was that PPS and PS X had applied an approval process that had worked in the past but that was not designed for the unique dynamics of this newly gentrified community. The fact that the school community and the immediate residential community were actually quite different had been overlooked in the approval phase. Because the school was so disconnected from the residents of the neighboring block they had assumed that their absence at the February meeting implied approval or disinterest in the playground project.

This disconnect had created tensions between the school, the surrounding neighbors and the residents of the projects before. Most notably, the area's largest and most popular existing park had become a tense meeting place. Students from PS X complained of feeling unwelcome there and in the fall of 2004 a racially charged fight took place at the park. The hope was that the new schoolyard would create a place where students from both the projects and the larger neighborhood could come together and feel comfortable. It could be considered "neutral ground," accessible to residents of the projects as well as the brownstones and condominiums. However, the Community Board's reaction showed that perhaps a "meeting ground" was not what everyone wanted.

Some nearby residents did not necessarily want the school to be a gathering place outside school hours. They preferred that the students return to the projects when school was over. It became clear after the meeting with the Community Board that the school would have to find a way to make this plan more attractive for its immediate neighbors. On a deeper level, it also became clear that there was serious distrust and hostility between residents and the school. This would have to be placated for the plans to move forward.

It was with this goal in mind that the day after the article was published, the same group of individuals that gathered at the first meeting the previous spring, came together in the Principal's office. The conversation turned almost immediately to garbage.

A River of Milk Runs Through It

PS X's previous brush with media notoriety had taken place a year earlier when 2 articles in the Daily News and a story on a local news channel had claimed that a "mountain of garbage" from PS X was drawing enormous rats to the neighborhood. The residents of the block across from where the trash was left complained that the trash

created a filthy river of milk that drew rats to the block. It's worth noting that approximately 85 % of schools in New York City have "curbside pickup" exactly like the trash pickup at PS X. Indeed, PS Y, the elementary school one block away had curbside pickup just like PS X. There was no uproar over the trash situation at PS Y, causing the PS X PTA president to remark that "apparently black kids' trash smells worse than white kids." An anonymous neighbor of PS X had a connection with the Mayor's office and it was established that the school needed to deposit its trash in dumpsters, rather than curbside. However, this was easier said than done.

The only place the dumpsters could be kept was in the school yard. Funding was obtained to purchase the new dumpsters but the Department of Sanitation could not guarantee that they would pick-up outside school hours. The only time outside school hours that they could guarantee pick-up was after midnight. Local residents did not want noisy garbage trucks disturbing them at night. However, the alternative was also unacceptable because it would be unsafe to have garbage trucks backing in and out of the yard during school hours when kids were present. Stuck between a rock and hard place, the garbage issue had been put on hold. All the while the Mayor's office had continued to put pressure on the school to resolve the issue.

The school had tried to alleviate the problem by having students dump their milk down the drain before discarding it and by keeping the trash inside until late in the day. However, the problem persisted and the residents continued to complain. In March of 2006, the Department of Health visited the school to assess the problem. They determined that the rats were actually coming from a nearby construction site and were drawn to the trash. It was unclear whether removing the school's garbage would really address the problem. Nonetheless, the Mayor's office continued to put pressure on the school. Something needed to be done with the school's garbage in order to show that the Mayor's office had responded to the complaints.

The garbage issue was raised almost immediately after the playground plans were halted by the Community Board. The thinking was that if the playground plans could be adjusted to incorporate dumpsters that were accessible from the street, perhaps the rat-hating neighbors would support the playground. It was decided that the only feasible location for the dumpsters was next to the park entrance. At this point, the landscape architect objected. She interjected that usually the first step she takes when renovating school yards is to *remove* dumpsters. She explained that dumpsters do not lessen the attraction of rats, they simply localize it. Placing dumpsters in the park would create an unattractive entrance and pose an eventual health risk for children playing there.

However, she informed us, there was another alternative. A trash compactor was more narrow than a dumpster, did not produce smells, kept rats out, and only needed to be emptied once a week. Because of its shape, the trash compactor could fit on the opposite side of the school building, away from the park. If we could get School Facilities and the Department of Sanitation to agree to this, perhaps we could increase support for the playground and have it approved. There was only one small problem. \$700 had been allocated for the dumpsters and a trash compactor cost \$50,000. Moreover, trash compactors were usually only used in schools 3-4 times the size and population of PS X. It was decided that we should nonetheless bring the suggestion of the trash compactor up. We would do so delicately, as if it had just occurred to us, so as not to seem too financially audacious.

A Window Opens: \$30,000 Flies Out

The following week, representatives from the Department of School Facilities, the Department of Sanitation, the Mayor's office, the Borough Presidents office, the Community Board, PPS, CBO, and the school community squeezed around a table in the principal's office. The representative from the Community Board gave a long speech about how poorly this matter had been handled by the school. The representative from PPS shared with the committee some of the concessions we had made to meet the Community Boards' needs. These concessions included more trees to absorb noise, a junior rather than full-size basketball court and a special chain-link fence that was difficult to climb.

The representative from the Mayor's office was impatient and wanted to know what was being done about the garbage problem. At this point the landscape architect shared her feelings about the dumpster. As if on cue, the representative from the Department of Sanitation, who had spoken to the principal before the meeting, produced pictures of the trash compactor. Information was shared about how odorless and efficient a compactor would be. The Mayor's office representative reiterated that this problem needed to be solved, regardless of cost. When asked if School Facilities would approve the purchase of a trash compactor, the representative remarked, "I open a window \$30,000 flies out."

The following morning, officials from PPS, the school and the CBO met with the Community Board Manager and "concerned" residents at the district office. At the meeting, the concessions that had been made, including the newly approved trash compactor, were shared with the residents. The residents reiterated their concerns about noise, hours of usage and trash. The head of the condominium board from a nearby building suggested the school purchase \$10,000 "solar powered" trash cans with miniature compactors, such as the ones recently installed in Bryant Park. PPS agreed to consider this suggestion. PPS and the school also agreed to decide upon hours of operation in conjunction with local residents. Progress was made at the meeting; however, the school and PPS were asked to present the revised plans again to the Community Board parks committee at their next meeting for final approval.

"Use Your Eyes"

On May 17th, 3 weeks after construction was supposed to have begun, a meeting was held at PS X with the Community Board Parks Committee. Present at the meeting was the Parks Committee, school administration, teachers, parents, CBO administrators and approximately 2 dozen local residents unaffiliated with PS X. The head of the parks committee began the meeting by clarifying that members of the parks committee would be given the opportunity to speak before members of the public. The meeting began with a presentation by the Executive Director of the Partnership for Public Space. He shared the new playground plan, including the adjustments to the layout, fencing and the trash compactor. Committee members voiced concerns about maintenance of the park and hours of usage. It was decided that a "Friends of the PS X Playground" committee would be formed, headed by the CBO and including members of both the school and surrounding residences. The reaction of the parks' committee members to these changes

seemed positive but before the committee voted the discussion had to be opened to the public.

Unfortunately, the productive and cooperative tone of the meeting deteriorated. Residents complained about the garbage. They complained about the noise. They complained about kids hanging around on stoops and harassing neighbors. When the principal explained the value of the trash compactor, a resident responded “I’ve seen the custodians and they can’t get the trash from the school to the compactor without spilling it everywhere!” When it was suggested that residents call the police if kids climb the (“un-climbable”) fences to get in the park after dark, they responded that the “police never come.” Repeatedly, the head of the parks committee asked that the conversation be kept to the issue of the playground. Repeatedly, the District Manager told residents that they could share complaints with him after the meeting. Nonetheless, the attacks continued.

Eventually, the head of the parks committee moved the agenda forward to the Community Board vote. A member of the Community Board prudently remarked that she hoped that the school’s neighbors had “used their eyes to look around” when they had chosen to live directly across the street from a school. This is part of what it means to live in an urban area, she remarked. The Community Board voted unanimously to approve the new playground and the meeting ended. Angry community members walked past the tables of cookies and juices, left the building, crossed the street, and went home.

Conclusion

Ironically, one of the stated goals of the park project was to create a place for the geographic and school community to come together. Instead, this project served to expose the lack of communication and trust between the school and its neighbors. The school’s goal was never explicitly shared with the geographic community and as a result, the park project seemed like something that was being imposed upon them by an indifferent school entity.

Thus, the relationship between the school and its neighbors continues to be a nebulous one. Is PS X responsible for the behavior of its students when they leave the building? When they walk up the block? Who are the residents to turn to when they’re made to feel uncomfortable on their own property? Is it wrong for residents to view the school as a possible ally?

I was struck during that final meeting by how far removed the issue had come from the actual reality of school children drinking milk and playing on slides. The meeting was held in a 2nd grade classroom and all these angry adults were crammed into tiny chairs and tables. The problem was really a problem of adults; adults not building relationships with each other; adults not talking honestly with students in the school about race and class and gentrification; adults allowing students to harass neighbors’ children or throw milk cartons on their stoops and lawns; adults expecting suburban conditions in an urban environment; adults punishing kids for adults’ incompetence. There was no framework or solution within the organization that could address these problems. Who has the time, energy or skills? So the focus was on simpler problems (garbage) with more obvious solutions (compactors).