

Reimagined in America: What Can the World Teach Us About
Building a Culture of Health?

Episode 15: Transforming Communities Through Nature

WEBINAR TRANSCRIPT

On the April 28, 2023 episode of RWJF's [Reimagined in America: What Can the World Teach Us About Building a Culture of Health](#) webinar series, Liz Soper of the National Wildlife Federation and Ángela Ibáñez of Fundación Patio Vivo shared insights from schools in Chile and other countries that are turning concrete playgrounds into nature-filled spaces to build healthy, sustainable, and equitable communities.

A full transcript of the discussion can be found below.

Please note: Transcripts are produced by a third-party transcription service and may contain discrepancies.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Good afternoon everyone. I hope you all had a chance to take the Blue Marble quiz that was up on the screen, or maybe after the webinar you can take a few minutes to take the quiz. It's super fun and there's lots of resources at the end of it. So I'm Karabi Acharya, I lead the Global Ideas for US Solutions team here at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. I'm your moderator today for our 15th, can you believe it? 15th episode of the Reimagined in America Webinar Series. If you're returning, welcome back and if this is your first time, we're so happy to have you. I want to start by taking this opportunity to recognize that RWJF is located on the ancestral lands of the Lenape people, also called Lenni Lenape, who were forcibly removed from their land and relocated west and north. As we begin this event, let's take a moment to honor the original caretakers of this land, recognizing the histories of land theft, violence, erasure, and oppression that have brought us here.

So let me go over a few logistics. Today for the first time, I'm super excited to say that we're offering the webinar in both English and Spanish. One of our speakers is going to be speaking in Spanish. So if you don't know Spanish as I don't, just take a moment to look at the bottom of your screen and you will see an interpretation button and you can select the English channel. There's also a Spanish channel if you prefer that, or if you don't select any, you will stay in the original audio. The webinar is being recorded and everyone will get an email next week with a link to the recording and any resources that we discuss. And then finally, we want to know your questions. A portion of our webinar is a Q&A section with the audience. So you can add those in using the Q&A button at the bottom of the screen. That's much easier for us than chat.

So if I asked you to picture a classroom, many of us would imagine four walls and a whiteboard. But what about the school grounds, the fields and parks where kids can find roly pollies or pick little flowers, roll down hills or run for cover in the trees when it rains? Research shows that when kids have the opportunity to play and learn in these natural spaces, which are often called green school grounds, they're healthier, happier, and more likely to succeed in school. So across the globe, we're seeing growing momentum to transform concrete playgrounds into nature filled spaces, spaces that help kids develop a meaningful relationship with nature and nurture their desire to protect it. Spaces that are designed with input and engagement from students, teachers, community members, parents, and that turns them into the park's best stewards, spaces that can benefit entire neighborhoods and that serve as welcoming, gathering places for the community. Ensuring that all kids have access to these outdoor spaces is essential for achieving health equity. Kids might experience the benefits first, but that ripples into families, neighborhoods, and communities.

Last year at a Salzburg Global seminar, the Children and Nature Network, along with other partners gathered dozens of leaders from across the globe who increased access to green schoolyards. And together they developed a global action agenda to help guide the growing schoolyard greening movement towards common goals that center equity and sustainability. So in Brazil for example, there's a movement called Playful Backyards that sees free and unstructured nature play as essential to a healthy childhood. These spaces invite kids to play independently with everything from rocks and leaves to water and fruits, and they experience the food cycle by planting seeds, watching them grow into vegetables, and then harvesting them to eat in a meal. These Playful Backyards are found in schools, but even also in some parks and public squares.

In Cameroon, kids of all ages are invited to join one of the 100 environmental clubs that Green Cameroon has created since 2006. At these clubs, students learn about local environmental issues like drought and floods, and they become critical thinkers about how their community can become more climate resilient. These kids become part of the solution by planting gardens and trees and even advocating for environmental friendly policies. I could go on and on. There's so many great examples.

I want to give a special thanks to Jaime Zaplatosch Ehrenberg, who's here with us today. Jaime's a member of the Children and Nature Networks Leadership team, and she's been pivotal in building bridges across all the great work that's been happening in different countries. We'll bring her into the conversation later on, but she connected us with our two wonderful speakers today who are going to talk about how schools can prioritize children's right to learn and play in nature. Thanks so much Jaime, for those connections. But before I introduce you to our speakers, we always want to begin by hearing from you. We have two questions. Take a look and click on your answers. The first question, what do you feel is the most important benefit that schoolyard greening would bring to your community? Just check one, the most important one. And then if you scroll down, you'll see the second question, which is, why did you join today's webinar? And so we'll just give you a minute or two to enter your results, enter your votes. And Kyle, you can let us know and we've got some results to share.

POLL

What do you feel is the most important benefit schoolyard greening would bring to your community? (Check one)

- Improve children's education through outdoor learning and play
- Advance kid's mental, nutritional and physical health
- Boost climate resilience and biodiversity
- Build community engagement and wellbeing
- Inspire communities to center equity
- None of the above

- Other

Why did you join today's webinar? (Check all that apply)

- I want to know how communities that are becoming more equitable and sustainable
- I'm looking for solutions that I can bring to my own community
- I want to understand what we can learn from other countries
- I never miss a Reimagined in America webinar if I can make it!

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

All right, pick your answer. I know it's hard to choose on the first one. Great. Well, so on the first question, what do you feel is the most important benefit of schoolyard greening? 61% of you said that it advances kids' mental, nutritional, and physical health, 61%. And so that's a strong majority. And then the second one at 17% is commitment and wellbeing. And then the third is improving children's education through outdoor learning. So thanks for that.

And then why did you join today's webinar? I want to know how communities are becoming more equitable and sustainable. 63% of you looking for solutions. That's awesome. 46% of you are looking for solutions. I think our speakers will have lots of solutions, 33% what you can learn from other countries, and 5%, 6 of you, and I love those 6, never miss a Reimagined in America webinar. So we will be growing that number, but those six are an awesome start. So thank you.

So let me introduce our speakers to you right now. Liz Soper dedicated her career to environment based education and sustainability with schools and local communities. Liz has worked for over 26 years with the National Wildlife Federation, where she currently serves as the Senior Director of Education. She's helped to bring the Global Eco Schools Program to the US, which engages teachers and students in sustainability education. And most recently, she collaborated with global leaders at the Salzburg Global Seminar to develop a global action agenda for improving health education and climate resilience in communities. Welcome Liz.

Ángela Ibáñez is co-founder of Patio Vivo, that's a nonprofit organization that was founded in Chile in 2014 and works to expand opportunities for children to grow, play, and learn in contact with nature. Ángela and her team transformed school grounds across Chile to improve children's wellbeing and regenerate ecosystems and neighborhoods that lack access to green space. And in 2020, Ángela was recognized as among the country's top 100 women leaders of the year. Fantastic. Welcome and thanks to you both for being here.

I know that Liz has been having some internet issues, so Liz, I'm assuming that ... Oh, great. So yeah, if you need to turn off video, that's fine, but it's wonderful to have you. So I'm going to kick off with a few questions of my own and then we'll turn to questions from the audience. So again, just as a reminder, you can submit a question at any time through the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen. And also if you haven't yet selected your interpretation channel, Ángela will be speaking in Spanish. And if your Spanish is rusty, you can go down to the interpretation channel and select English for simultaneous translation. All right, let's begin. Ángela, I'd love for you to tell us a story about the work that you're doing in schools in Chile that are bringing children and communities closer to nature. What does it look like to create greener schoolyards? And what impacts have you seen on the health and wellbeing of children?

GUEST SPEAKER: Ángela Ibáñez, Fundación Patio Vivo

Hi everybody. Thank you very much once again for this invitation. It is a great pleasure to be here with you. So let me tell you a story about Chile. Let me give you a bit of a general context and then give you a specific example. But in Chile, when the school bell rings to go out to recess to play, kids are exposed to these kinds of cold spaces, and we're not really offering them a lot of proposals for them to be able to play. A lot of the time kids end up kicking around a ball, but that's just for a few students and others are excluded.

And if we zoom in on the problems that are occurring, we can see that unfortunately we have issues of students getting along coexisting harmoniously at schools. And we also have some serious health issues because 58% of our students are either overweight or obese. What's more, we have very limited access to these open air spaces. So in Patio Vivo, we saw that we had the opportunity to provide space, open up space for nature in school yards, and in doing so deal with these issues. And so we have already transformed more than 60 schools and we've formed links between communities, land and culture. I'd like to draw your attention to the photos up on the screen. This is a school in Santiago de Chile in the capitol. This is a very highly vulnerable and disadvantaged area. You can see the before and the after of the project.

As you can appreciate, this was a schoolyard that didn't offer any kind of opportunities to students. There's no stimulus available on the left-hand side, but we went through this process to create a living schoolyard, a green space. And here we can see that students can now also interact with nature in their daily play. Their process consists of firstly carrying out a diagnostic phase, working in participation with the community. Then there's a design phase. We think about the educational aspect. We know that every single element will open students up to new ideas. And so we have to be very careful with the design. And then we move over to the building phase and then the activation phase. This is where we continue to work with the community. Could we please go to the next slide?

And so here in these photographs, I would like to draw your attention to the types of play, open air play that the students are engaging in. This is the very same school year that we saw on the previous slide. This is what happens when you have a green space. So it is through these types of activities and play in the open air that students start to develop new physical, social and emotional skills. So on the left, in the first image, we can see a challenging activity in which students have to really concentrate on what they're doing while they play. And they have to really build their self-confidence, play on this structure, and they also start to build bodily awareness.

And they also really work on resilience. What happens when they fall down, they have to get up again and try again. In the middle photograph, we can see students engaged in free play. And there's also, we could see a copper rail dialogue with the surroundings. It's also about respect amongst them. And then in the final image, we can see collaborative play. And it's also an active game because along with an educator, they all come to an agreement as to the rules of the game, and they have to follow them so that they can get this yellow sheet up in the sky, up in the air together. And so they're also working on their creativity.

And so the school yard also becomes much more inclusive. There's space for everyone. No, it's not only those who are better at kicking or throwing the ball around who are involved, but everybody can find a space. People can move between different groups. There's a space for those who want to work on a more focused activity, there's a space for those who want more free play, et cetera. We believe that the school yard is also very important in terms of nature for students to learn how to get along with one another, and also how to exist in nature and live with their own natures. Thank you very much.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Thanks so much, Ángela. Let me turn to you, Liz. In the US, the National Wildlife Federation supports programs that engage students from pre-K through 12th grade in making their community a more healthy and sustainable place to live. What insights are you drawing from initiatives developed in other countries like Patio Vivo's work in Chile, and how have students and communities experienced those exchanges?

GUEST SPEAKER: Liz Soper, National Wildlife Federation

Well, thank you Karabi, and this topic is so close to my heart, and I just want to thank you all for allowing me to be a part of this conversation and hope I can provide some useful insights here today. So having been engaged in the Global Eco Schools Program, which is run by the Foundation for Environmental Education in Denmark, for over 12 years, we've been the US host here in America. And most recently, as you indicated, being a fellow as part of the Salzburg Global lessons on greening school grounds and outdoor learning project, I really have had the opportunity to be exposed and to learn from so many different countries in regard to green schoolyards and education for

sustainability. So there are many different insights that I could focus on today because I have truly learned quite a lot from all these other countries, but I'm going to focus on just one. And that's the importance of community. And I think Ángela actually touched on that as well in her remarks.

So community support, input and ownership of these green schoolyard sites is truly critical for success, and I think can also serve to actually improve community engagement or social capital. Over the past few decades here in the United States, there has been a decline in community engagement and social capital, no doubt due to technology like we are on today. Social, cultural, economic changes, and I probably shouldn't say this as a blanket statement because in fact, some of our work with different BIPOC communities and as well immigrant communities, we see community engagement much higher. But in those communities where we have low engagement, social capital, this is where I believe that we truly do have the opportunity to use schools and green school grounds as a way to build back up that capital.

So community has always been an important component of National Wildlife Federation's education programs, particularly our School Year at Habitat program, but it has not had the priority focus that I believe it probably should have, and just was one of a number of defining factors. Decades ago, as some of you may know, the program was really started to create habitat for wildlife. And we did that on residential areas as well as school grounds and in whole communities. And then we started to truly focus on the benefits of these green school yards for academics, for helping teachers to meet the standards, their curriculum, which these are all really good and important aspects of green school grounds. But the lessons that I've really learned over the last couple of years from being engaged with other countries and programs like Patio Vivo is that community needs to be first. It truly needs to be the overarching concept or umbrella under which all of our work falls under.

And so I just want to share a brief example of where I think NWF has done a really good job of putting community first. And this is our longstanding work in Broward County, which is where Fort Lauderdale is, just North of Miami, for those of you who know the Florida area. And NWF has worked in Broward County now for over 20 years creating a network of community-based partners whose main goal was to create habitat for wildlife as well as equitable access to nature for people. And over the past six years now, NWF has been working in close partnership with an organization called NatureScape Broward, one of our key partners there, and has developed a Broward habitat connectivity project, which has engaged local partners, residents, and schools to create new islands of wildlife habitat throughout the county, not only for wildlife, but also to create climate resiliency.

So volunteers and staff have planted hundreds of native trees, shrubs across Broward County, and more than 125 schools were engaged in greening their school grounds and

planting trees. So it was this community buy-in and resulting environmental stewardship that was essential in building Broward as a climate resilient community. So again, that connection to community, that sense of place, that access to nearby nature is what makes these programs, I think, truly impactful and successful. Thank you.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Thanks so much, Liz. This next question is for both of you. So ensuring that everyone has access to green space is more important than ever, and especially as climate change increasingly threatens our health. So how do you see the work that you're doing in schools as levers for broader change? How can these projects drive equity in communities that helps us all to lead a healthier, more sustainable future? So Ángela let me start with you. How do you see it connecting to broader change efforts?

GUEST SPEAKER: Ángela Ibáñez, Fundación Patio Vivo

I think that schools play a fundamental role when it comes to really developing cities that are resilient to climate change and social equity. I'm sorry, could you please share my images? I think I have some images for my response to this question. Thank you very much. Climate change and climate resilience. Well, as I was saying, schools here play a fundamental role because we can transform these spaces that are currently completely dead into living spaces. And this can be done by, for example, installing these materials that allow soil drainage as you see on the left, and we can start to give life back to the Earth once again. We can also plant trees and shrubs that can help to reduce temperatures in school facilities.

And we also see here a fundamental role played by these new gardens, these new forests that we are creating in urban spaces so that teachers can also provide more ecological education to their students. We can use these outdoor spaces to teach students about nature and about life itself. The idea here is that students can firsthand learn about nature. They can touch, they can feel, they can smell plants, they can do all the same things with the Earth, and they can understand why we as humans are part of nature.

And so I think it is really essential that boys and girls have firsthand experience with nature, that they have the opportunity to discover little insects and feed them and take care of them. It's about really becoming aware of nature, becoming aware of how we are part of nature. And I think in doing so that we are teaching students to take care both in the present and in the future. And that's why I believe that is urgent given the climate emergency that we are currently experiencing, that we transform schools, that we make them into forests, that we create these green spaces and that we invite the community in. Additionally, it's also urgent that we really invest our energy in working with schools in vulnerable areas, hopefully in urban areas, which is where we see the greatest need and where we really need to create this change. Thank you very much.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Yeah, thanks so much. I couldn't agree more. Liz, same question to you. How do you see the work in schools sort of as levers for broader change in the community?

GUEST SPEAKER: Liz Soper, National Wildlife Federation

Sure. I think that at National Wildlife Federation, we truly believe that schools are more than just places where students go to learn. They're the heart of our neighborhoods and communities in which they serve. And there's no doubt that the welfare of the vitality of our schools and the communities are definitely intertwined. So I think as communities across the world address these real impacts from climate change, and not just climate, but pandemics, racial inequality, all of these things that are really affecting our communities, schools can serve as demonstration models for community equity, resilience, health, and a sustainable future. I think we need to start thinking about schools as hubs for modeling community resiliency, because we've spoken to some of the benefits that they have, that equitable access to nature and green space, especially in vulnerable urban areas, connecting kids or students to nature, which will help them shift from eco anxiety to agency.

I think most of us probably on this webinar have seen the headlines of how our youth are experiencing much higher levels of mental anxiety because of climate, because of all the other things happening. And research has shown us that time outside, that connection to nature can really reduce that stress and anxiety. Green schoolyards provides students with the opportunity to truly engage in what we call these solution-based actions. They become involved in actually solving the problems, helping to build that sense of agency and hope, and they can actually see that they're making a difference. And again, these sites can serve as models for climate change, resiliency, green infrastructure projects can be built on school grounds and shown to the community. And NWF has a program that we've been piloting in several different locations across the US. It started in New York City and we've had it replicated in Houston, the Virgin Islands, as well as we're looking to replicate it now in Puerto Rico. And I think I have some pictures associated with this if you want to pop them up.

This program is the Resilient School's Consortium or RISC. It works in partnership with the community in which the schools are located, educating youth and community about climate science, impacts, justice and the natural and built solutions that can increase climate resiliency. Students as part of these programs engage in solution-based actions on their school grounds and in their communities such as tree planting, creating green infrastructure for stormwater runoff and dune restoration as you see here in this photo. In fact, this spring, students in Coney Island actually plant planted over 15,000 dune comb plants this spring. So that's a lot of plants and a lot of habitat restoration and climate resiliency, but they're basically working to show the community how the impacts of

extreme weather can be mitigated. So again, I believe our schools actually can be levers for broader change in many different ways. Thanks.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

That's incredible. Really incredible. So we're getting lots of audience questions and I want to turn to that, but first I want to invite Jaime Zaplatosch Ehrenberg into our conversation. As I said, she's with the Children in Nature Network. Welcome, Jaime. I want to direct this first question to you, which is you have a really interesting vantage point in your work where you're seeing how communities in the US and abroad are greening their schools. How have you noticed these spaces being used outside of school hours, and are you seeing that the community is taking advantage of those spaces?

GUEST SPEAKER: Jamie Zaplatosch Ehrenberg, Children and Nature Network

Thanks Karabi, and thanks for having us all here on the Reimagined America webinar today. So in the US in particular, we have school districts being one of the top three landowners in cities. And when you think about that network of public spaces, if indeed that they're open to the public, how they can support communities, children's connection to nature, as well as environmental benefits, it's pretty impactful. In some of the case studies that we focused as part of our greening school grounds and outdoor learning project, I can lift up Rotterdam and Paris and their projects where they're really focused on these schoolyards being open to the public outside of school hours so that there, especially in those two cities as an example, where there's such limited access to green space that everything is so built. But we're seeing that all over the US as well. I'm thinking about New Jersey and places in New York City where there's not any space except for schoolyards. And so being able to have these schoolyards open to the public and open to the community for use is really amazing.

In the US, Austin, and I know we have some folks here with us from Austin, like I said, New York City, Chicago, Denver, there are programs around the country, green schoolyard programs around the country, Houston, that have really been focused on creating these open spaces for the community on school grounds. And people are going to their schoolyard to just sit and relax like Liz was talking about, for their mental health benefits and restoration. They're really great intergenerational spaces for community members to be at together. But also, I think I would just note that these are being used as parks. I mean, so really thinking about schoolyards as parks where you don't have to drive across the city or really in a lot of places that is what's happening in order to get to a good park. And when people, community members are part of the design process of these schoolyards, it's a really great opportunity for them to be so connected and get what they want out of their own park in their neighborhood.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Sorry, lost my cursor. Thanks so much, Jaime. So we're getting lots of great questions from the audience. And again, if you have a question for one of our speakers or for Jaime, please enter it in the Q&A button on your screen. So this is a really interesting question. So can you speak to, and I think this could go to anyone who's interested, can you speak to the importance of these initiatives in building community with more than the human world, I.E, The natural world, plants and animals? And towards, oops, I just lost the question. Towards greater relational care and understanding of independence in the context of ecological justice? Who would like to start about building the connection with the natural world?

GUEST SPEAKER: Liz Soper, National Wildlife Federation

Karabi, I could easily do that. Yeah, I mean our primary goal in obviously National Wildlife Federation is we're looking at the ecosystem approach. We're looking at trying to protect wildlife in their habitat across all areas, including urban areas. So our goal is to work with schools to plant native habitat that is native to their region, that is native to the wildlife species that belong there, and to ensure that the students and the community and the teachers have a really good sense of what that means to help wildlife survive in their community. And even to get them to understand in very urban areas, even like New York City, as Jaime said, there are wildlife species there that depend upon habitats still.

And so developing green schoolyards, even on rooftops is an amazing opportunity to provide these ecological benefits, especially with migratory birds, all of the different tree planting that schools are doing. So the more we have these green schoolyards, the more we can begin to build out these corridors of habitats throughout communities. And what we have found over the decades in our habitat programs is that it started with just backyards with residential, and then schools wanted to get involved, and businesses, and now we have whole communities creating habitat for wildlife. So yeah, there's a great opportunity there.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Fantastic. Ángela, I'm curious in Chile, how do you see that these schoolyards are helping to build relationships with plants and animals, our natural environment?

GUEST SPEAKER: Ángela Ibáñez, Fundación Patio Vivo

Well, for us it is key to think about care, the care that we understand with these green spaces that open up a space for nature in urban areas. So I'm here referring to community care and caring for biodiversity that emerges in these spaces, but it's also a chain of care because children also feel cared for by their schools, by the adults there because they are going to a school where there is a play area with the presence of nature, and they feel that they become part of this nature and therefore that they care for nature. Because here they care for plants, trees, and the little bugs as well as the fauna

that they find there. Because at the end of the day, what we are doing is that we are regenerating ecosystems that have completely died in these areas. So it's about, again, creating this chain of care.

When we transform a school yard, there's an activation period in which adults partake, so they help to foster play. And this also creates an enormous cultural change so that adults also get on board and become part of this chain of care towards nature. We have a program called, I Learn About Nature, and so we have seen how students and teachers look at the actions that they can take to take care of these new green schoolyards. It's very exciting to see how communities really emerge and are activated. They've previously felt completely disconnected from nature, from ecosystems, but they get excited, it's time to go and water this tree, it's time to go and plant some more shrubs. And that becomes part of their routine. I think this is extremely valuable and this is incredible to see how this can happen from just a small garden project.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Fantastic. Thank you so much. All right, so lots of questions coming in. So often the communities that we engage at the beginning of a project are not the same a few years later due to either staff turnover or the gentrification of a neighborhood. How do you continue engagement beyond the initial build? Ángela, I see you nodding. Do you want to jump in first with that question?

GUEST SPEAKER: Ángela Ibáñez, Fundación Patio Vivo

Yes, I would love to. This is one of the biggest challenges we face. We see a lot of turnover in the school system, especially post pandemic because the sector was left very debilitated and damaged, and so there's really high turnover there. And so we really have to focus on the one hand on children and play and on the other hand, on the teams involved. And what we have seen is that over years, school yards are consolidated. They go beyond simple play time and it's about becoming in contact or staying in contact with nature because we see how trees continue to grow and the project starts to really take root.

However, what we have to continuously work on or rework on is the culture with adults. A lot of adults are afraid of play and they're really afraid of nature and natural elements. I mean, it's not no reason at all that we have these cold concrete playgrounds. Obviously that comes from adults. And so we have to always go back to schools where we've started these projects and reconnect with these projects and really boost and work on this culture of open air play. We have to teach adults not to be afraid. And I'd say that that is the hardest bit of it all. It's about saying to the adults, "Look, don't be afraid of splinters or a stick, don't be scared that kids are going to put rocks in their mouth." That kind of thing. Or they'll be afraid that they might fall over when they're playing and they're balancing on something.

And as adults, there are some things that we can't do. It's not so easy for us to hang off the monkey bars anymore. And so what we tend to do is that we project our fears onto our students. And so this is the hardest thing to deal with. It's something that you have to really continue to work on. But what's really wonderful to see is that at the end of the day, the students are right and they get their own way. They manage to convince the adults, the teachers, look, don't be afraid and please. But yes, it is constant work that we have to do.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

That's such a good point, and I love that, that you have to convince the adults and there was actually another question here and would love to bring Jaime and Liz into this, about this issue of safety. That comes up a lot where there is concern that putting kids in nature or connecting kids to nature causes all kinds of safety issues just as Ángela was talking about. Do you see that a lot and how do you address that in your work? Liz or Jaime, who wants to jump in?

GUEST SPEAKER: Jamie Zaplatosch Ehrenberg, Children and Nature Network

I can start and then Liz, if you want to add anything. One of the biggest things, Children in Nature Network works with communities all over the US with cities and school districts to support the development of green school ground programs. And we hear this a lot. It's not the times, although there has been in the US I would say spikes in violence of all sorts, especially in the last three years, four years around the pandemic and pre-pandemic. It isn't a new topic and we're pretty used to hearing about it. That all said, there's a lot in terms of the design and ownership and community engagement that really matters when it comes to designing these spaces. There's the broken windows theory that talks about a not cared for space is more likely to be where the negative behavior takes place. And when you look at schoolyards, like Ángela showed these really vacant spaces with asphalt and concrete and just fencing, it doesn't look like a cared for, vibrant living space that people want to be in. So it's a lot more likely that those spaces are going to experience more issues.

When you engage again, the school community, which is teachers, students, parents, residents around the schoolyard, in designing those spaces, they're going to use the spaces. And so if there's positive activity that is happening there, it really just shifts what happens around the schoolyards. And there have been different studies that have been tracking crime around schoolyards or different programs and it's harder to peel apart all of the variables, but really that community engagement and usage and ownership of those spaces throughout the entire process of developing a green school ground is really important.

GUEST SPEAKER: Liz Soper, National Wildlife Federation

And I would just add to that, I mean I think that's completely accurate that from day one, engaging the community and the development of the site so that it's not just a school site, it's just not where the kids get to play during school. Because as parents and other community members also utilize the site or enjoy the site, they develop this ownership, they develop a care for this place, and they're going to work really hard to ensure that it continues. And that crime drugs, things like that don't happen in their space that they've developed. I think the other key thing is engage the whole school too. The facility staff is incredibly important. If they're brought in at the very beginning, they're working with students to help design and think about what they could have on their school site, they're going to have ownership as well and are going to be much more positive about helping to maintain the area.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Thanks so much. Yeah, it all comes back to community engagement it seems. Here's another question, and this could be really for all three of you. For those who want to start programs to create green schoolyards, what do you see are the biggest hurdles and roadblocks that we should be aware of? People who want to do that? And I would say other than funding. So other than funding, what are the big roadblocks and hurdles? Who wants to start with that?

GUEST SPEAKER: Liz Soper, National Wildlife Federation

I can just jump in and say my biggest advice that I provide to schools is to start small. And that even if you are creating a very small pollinator garden as a green area, that is the beginnings of a bigger plan for greening out the whole schoolyard. You have to start small because if you try to engage on a much larger level, it's a lot more work. It's a lot more money, it's a lot more work, you need a lot more volunteers. But as you begin to grow even a small space and then grow and grow and grow, more people see it, they want to be engaged, they want to be involved, they want to get their kids out there, other teachers want to be involved. So it seems like it's kind of simple advice, but starting really small is often the best way to start.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Thanks, Liz. Ángela, Jaime, what would you add? What are some of the biggest hurdles or roadblocks?

GUEST SPEAKER: Ángela Ibáñez, Fundación Patio Vivo

In Chile, it's interesting because it's actually the opposite to what Liz has said it. It's about starting with the school structure. We've actually been very successful when we have transformed large spaces. It's interesting to hear the contrast because I think these

big transformations have enabled us to include more members of the school community and to invite more people to connect with nature. When we have done small things, let's say we have schools with anywhere from 507,000 students, when we start with something small, they don't work. They don't last because they receive a lot of use, and so they end up being destroyed if we have just a small garden.

So I think that it's really about the school culture. If you have a school culture in which we have support from families, I think that starting with something small could work really well in that kind of space where there will be respect from the community. But in Chile, families are not as involved as we would like them to be with schools. So for us, it has been better to do a complete transformation of the entire schoolyard at the basic education level for the primary education level. And that large transformation is like an invitation for parents to get involved and to observe how we start to open up space for nature with gardens, with forests, et cetera.

But again, I think this is due to the type of school academic culture that we have here. So first off, you have to identify what the school culture is, what our local communities are like, because success for us historically has been a certain way, and we should also look at that before we start on any new project because we have seen again and again these kinds of issues. But again, each individual school culture is slightly different. So it's very important to pay attention to that. We have to be very precise in the strategy to be used to ensure that it will work in the long term. Liz, I don't know if it makes sense to you, but that's what has happened in our experience.

GUEST SPEAKER: Liz Soper, National Wildlife Federation

Yeah, I mean, I agree, if you have the capacity and the ability to do something on a large scale, it definitely has a bigger impact to start and people can see the value of it. But for those folks who are just starting, have no experience or unsure where to begin, I try to say, calm them down and say, just start small. See what you can do, see who you can bring in from the community to help you, see who wants to be engaged and involved. And I think that's where that advice comes from.

GUEST SPEAKER: Jamie Zaplatosch Ehrenberg, Children and Nature Network

And I would add a different barrier, if I may, that I think the mental mindset of leadership, being able to approve and give resources to transforming school grounds is really important too. It's funny, we're talking at three different levels, but all of them are equally important for the success of green school grounds in their long term. But being able to talk to decision makers and leaders, whether it's at a school district or a city or depending on how your education structure is set up, or even a school principal in an individual school and really getting their buy-in of why they should approve of time and resources being put into transforming schoolyards, of why does that matter and how does that advance their priorities? And a lot of times it comes down to money and

matching priorities up with money. Although I know that the question was specifically talking not about money, but it really does matter when school districts are going to put resources in place to allow this to happen equitably across the school district. Those resources need to be in line.

MODERATOR: Karabi Acharya, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Thanks so much. There are still so many really interesting questions coming in, and I'm really bummed that I have to end the Q&A part of our session today. It's such an interesting discussion. We will be saving the chat. So if you haven't been able to follow the chat, there's lots of interesting comments and questions. So now I have a question for the entire audience and would love for you to drop your response to the question in the chat. So my question for all of you is think back to the outdoor areas that you had in your elementary or junior high school. How would you reimagine those spaces? What would you want to change about them after today's conversation? So if you can enter that into the chat. I think we have a slide on it.

Less asphalt. Yes. What else? Yeah, more trees, plants, less cats and dogs, native species, climbing trees, flower gardens, no plastic or metal, nature-based play scapes. That's great. Pollinator garden, more adult engagement, flowing water, sports equipment. This is fantastic. Playing in the rain. I would add playing in the snow. You can play outside in all weather. Yes, really important. Facilities for kids with disabilities. Absolutely. Music. I love that. These are all really great responses.

So I want to thank everyone for joining us in this incredible conversation, Liz, Ángela, Jaime, thank you so much. There are many links in the chat for you to learn more about their work. They will also be shared in the email that we will send around next week along with the recording. So really want to thank you so much for sharing this amazing work with us. As I said, we'll make the recording available to everyone and please share it with everyone and anyone. As you sign off, we have a very short survey for you that's going to pop up on your screen. Your feedback really truly helps us in designing these webinars. As always, stay safe, be well, and I hope to see you on the next Reimagined in America webinar. Thank you.