

## **Schoolyard Habitats – Questions to Consider before Beginning**

Excellent schoolyard habitats improve the community's environmental health by reducing storm-water runoff, solving erosion problems, increasing canopy cover, increasing biodiversity as well as providing children with opportunities for formal and informal interactions with the natural world. These accessible habitats, whether created or existing natural areas, are used for classroom instruction and for interaction with the natural world. Schoolyard habitats are an integrated component of the curriculum inextricably linked to the academic achievements of the school as well as the ecological health of the surrounding area and community.

### ***How do we begin?***

The first step towards a successful outdoor classroom/schoolyard habitat project is forming a team consisting of administrators, maintenance personnel, students, teachers, parents, community members, and natural resource professionals who will support the project. This team will ensure that the project is created with full participation of the school and will create the foundation of support the school needs to create and maintain the schoolyard habitat. If one or two people are carrying the whole load for the project, they will quickly burn out. You need a good base of volunteers and keep them engaged. Make it fun! Celebrate the milestones.

### ***What is right for our school?***

Determine how much and what kind of space is available. Ask students, teachers, staff, parents and neighbors what they want to get out of a schoolyard habitat. What are their objectives? This will help guide what they would like to see there and how to lay out the habitat features. It is important that each person feels that his/her opinions and interests are valued and considered. It allows participants to express their views, and provides an opportunity to identify what areas of the site are liked and disliked, valued and feared, and what similarities and differences exist between various perceptions and experiences of the site. Eliciting this diverse feedback is the best way to ensure project buy-in and support over time.

### ***How do we generate community support?***

It is crucial to consult neighbors and other community members at the beginning of the process to get their perspective and elicit their support. The benefits of schoolyard habitats can reach beyond the school and provide a place for community members to enjoy after school hours. Attend local club/organization meetings (e.g. garden, rotary, etc.) to get the community involved. Ask your local Friends group to get involved.

### ***How do we get the support of our maintenance staff?***

It is crucial to involve maintenance staff at the beginning of the process because schoolyard habitats are long-term commitments to school ground use and maintenance. It is important to get their perspective and involve them in project planning so they have project buy-in and can help guide the development of a long-term maintenance strategy.

***Our school has a high teacher and staff turnover, how will this work at our school?***

That's why it's so important to build a broad base of support right at the beginning. Recruit several teachers, staff, parents and students for the project and divide tasks among everyone so if one person leaves the remaining team can still continue with the project. When new hires arrive, bring them on-board so they feel included.

***What if we do not have the funding for our project?***

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has funding opportunities to foster the development of outdoor classrooms or schoolyard habitat projects. They also provide on-site technical assistance and guidance to schools who wish to create sustainable outdoor classrooms that benefit native fish and wildlife.

Make sure the scope of your project reflects your school's ability to fundraise. Look for creative ways to get things for free. If your group has made efforts to involve as many sectors of the community as possible, you will find yourself with a large resource base to approach for funding. When people are familiar with and involved in a project, they are much more likely to donate their time and resources. Bringing in community members might also present opportunities for additional funding from local civic groups or conservation groups. It is important to involve these potential contributors in the planning process.

***Are there any restrictions for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service funding?***

The schoolyard habitat must include a habitat restoration component and be in place for a minimum of 10 years.

***What constitutes habitat restoration?***

- ✓ It benefits trust species (e.g. salmon, migratory birds, endangered species)
- ✓ Ecologically sound

Ecologically sound schoolyard habitat projects provide habitat for local and migratory wildlife, including songbirds, shorebirds, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish (salmon) and insects. In many cases, these habitats also provide a vegetative buffer to nearby streams, reducing pollution reaching these waterways. To benefit the environment, the habitats must be significant enough in size and scope to have a lasting impact in the community. Critical to a successful project is the exclusive use of native plants. Native plant populations are the foundation to the native ecosystem.

***What about safety and vandalism?***

In developing school grounds, often the two greatest concerns expressed by parents and teachers are those of safety and vandalism. In the initial design phase of the project, there are many things that can be done (depending on your schools design) to help ensure that children (and others) are kept safe while using the space. If students, teachers and the community feel that the school ground area is safe, they will be more likely to use it. The more people are engaged in the process, and that use the site on a continual basis, the less vandalism there is likely to be. The more you encourage the direct involvement of the community, the more you

reduce vandalism. It is important during the design phase of the project, to make sure that the area looks and feels safe.

***What are some things to consider when designing a schoolyard habitat?***

- Where does snow get piled up when shoveled or plowed in the winter?
- Where are your sources of water?
- Where does your rainwater runoff or pool?
- Are there any community concerns, such as views or safety?
- What historical features or existing features could be incorporated into the design?

***Who runs it?***

Students build and maintain it. Schoolyard habitats are inspired by and created by students with new students building upon the existing work of past students.

***What next?***

The first step is to create a team that includes students, teachers, parents, administrators, maintenance personnel and community members who will support the project. This team will ensure the project is created with full participation of the school, and will create the foundation of support the school needs to sustain and maintain the schoolyard habitat. The team may grow and shrink over the years and participants will change, but having a core list of who should be involved is the key to success.

Once you have formed a team, the Service can help you start developing a master plan by assessing the school grounds. Some of the items included in a master plan are storm water flow, existing wildlife habitat, and human use patterns. Then you can begin to brainstorm and envision the features that you want to transform your schoolyard!