Communities Grow Greener When Young People Have a Voice: Building Alliances for Place-Based Learning and Civic Action

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When we talk about civic engagement for young people who are too young to vote, what do we mean?
considering social and environmental responsibility when making decisions

Whittier Elementary School, Boulder, CO – planning 'playgrounds with nature for children of all abilities'
investigating how community spaces and local environments function, and problem-solving issues

Students in applied science elective at Casey Middle School, Boulder, CO study creek ecology before making recommendations for redesign of the Boulder Civic Area, which includes the creek.
voicing ideas to decision-makers and other people in the community through speaking, writing or the arts

painting murals depicting child-friendly communities - artist in the Society for Creative Aging, environmental design student, and students at Columbine Elementary School, Boulder, CO
educating others so they can make choices that benefit their communities and the environment

drawing by fourth grader in Heatherwood Elementary School, Boulder, CO for the Department of Open Space & Mountain Parks website and trail signage
offering community service

a family nature club, Columbia Families in Nature, on a Chesapeake Bay Trust watershed exploration and education service outing
Cleveland Metro Parks Zoo – Zoo Crew

Bark-a-palooza Dog Walk
to raise funds for livestock guard dogs for native people in a nature reserve in Tanzania

raising funds for environmental causes
Columbia Families in Nature planting trees for Howard County Recreation & Parks, MD

participating in groups that improve communities or natural areas
Key Steps in Involving Young People in Local Investigations and Action to Improve Community Environments

1. Building relationships with community partners, including partnerships with under-represented communities

2. Identifying projects that serve all partners
3. Identifying and implementing participatory practices to engage young people in:

• investigating and evaluating local places and environmental issues
• sharing what they discover
• developing ideas for action
• taking action

4. Evaluating outcomes
Why is it important to invest in building partnerships that enable young people to experience civic engagement?
It is difficult for teachers to do civic projects alone—they need allies.

Environmental agencies and organizations want to connect with young people—schools and out-of-school programs are places to find them.

English-language learning classes head out with their teachers, Growing Up Boulder staff, and staff "from the Boulder, CO planning department to identify key resources for 15-minute neighborhoods"
When environmental organizations and local governments form partnerships with schools and out-of-school programs, they can better serve the diversity of their communities.

Retired residents of senior housing mentored fourth graders at Flatirons Elementary School, Boulder, CO as they developed ideas to share with the city to revitalize a commercial corridor in their neighborhood.
Local, regional and global environmental problems can’t be solved by individual action alone—young people need opportunities to gain skills in collective action.

Climate strike, Denver, 2019, organized by high school students

**Article 12:**
The right to express views freely in all matters that affect them

**Article 13:**
The right to seek, receive, and impart information of all kinds, in writing or print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice

**Article 14:**
The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion

**Article 15:**
The right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly
Young people learn how environmental decisions are made, how to work in intergenerational groups, and that their ideas can matter and make a difference.

elementary school students presenting their Civic Area ideas to Boulder City Council

photo by Willem van Vliet
Growing Up Boulder (GUB) is Boulder’s child and youth-friendly city initiative.

**Vision:** To inspire communities around the US and the world to adopt a child-friendly lens while planning and developing communities for all.

**Mission:** To empower young people with opportunities for inclusion, influence and deliberation on local issues that affect their lives.
About Growing Up Boulder

- Founded in 2009
- Serves ages 0-18, mentored by university students
- Engaged 6,500 children and youth on 100+ projects locally
- 50% or more of young people from historically marginalized groups
- Reached 2.5 million people globally
- Designed the US’s first child-friendly city map with kids
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

A treaty ratified in 1989 by all countries except the United States
Today, the initiative reaches approximately 30 million children in 40 countries worldwide.
Growing Up Boulder - Structure

- Four primary partners with an MOU: Growing Up Boulder, University of Colorado, City of Boulder, Boulder Valley School District
- Steering Committee: ~15 organizations per year, 60 partners overall
- Executive committee → board
- Small start to established initiative
Formality of relationships

Number of partnerships

- Growing Up Boulder (GUB)
- UNICEF USA Child-friendly city initiatives (UUSA CFCI)
- California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB)

Child and youth participatory planning initiatives:
Growing Up Boulder - Model

Establish Children as Experts

Synthesize & Share

City & Community Partner Dialogue

City Introduction & Framework

Increase Children's Competence

Experts & Precedents
Gunbarrel Hill integrated site project
(with a GUB focus on the Woods Brothers property)

2020-21
Why this project for a case study?

- Built upon old and new partnerships
- Children became ecostewards
- Employed place-based learning
- Elevated children’s voices and led to civic action
- Occurred during the pandemic
A three-part, year-long inquiry

- **OSMP/GUB Wood Brothers**
  - Small-scale. “This is your backyard; how do you want to discover nature in this area?”
  - Larger-scale. “What kind of outdoor learning/outdoor classroom experiences would you like to have?”
- **OSMP Gunbarrel Hill**: Site specific. The idea: Trail signage for land restoration
- **Indigenous peoples of Colorado** unit in 4th grade curriculum
Woods Brothers Project

Heatherwood Elementary

Gunbarrel Hill Student Art Project (Spring 2021)

Wood Brothers Student Engagement (2020-2021 School Year)

Gunbarrel Hill ISP Boundary (finalized Feb. 2020)
Methods used from our book: Placemaking with Children and Youth: Participatory Practices for Planning Sustainable Communities

- Site visit and PEP
- Research
- Art
- Video production
- Essay writing
- Interviewing experts
- Sharing out to decision-makers
What kinds of nature discovery experiences do you want to have on the Wood Brothers property?

- Wildlife Viewing Stations/Treehouse Observation Tower
- Designated Trails to Preserve & Protect with Interpretive Signage
- Opportunities to Explore – Structured and Unstructured
- Opportunities to Play and Build
- Picnic Tables, Shelters & Benches
- Maintain Sledding Hill
What kind of outdoor learning/outdoor classroom experiences would you like to have?

- NATURALIST PROGRAMMING
- TAKE OUR CLASSROOM OUTDOORS (OUTDOOR CLASSROOM)
- NATURAL AMPHITHEATER
- WILDLIFE VIEWING STATIONS/TREEHOUSE OBSERVATION TOWER
- AMENITIES FOR OUTDOOR LEARNING
Educational Video by Eden
Qualitative evaluation
What was your favorite part of working with Open Space and Mountain Parks and Growing Up Boulder and learning about Indigenous Peoples?

Kids’ answers:

• “Going to the sites - it was easier to learn when you are actually there”

• “Everything!!!” (multiple kids)
How did it make you feel to give your input to OSMP about Wood Brothers and Gunbarrel Hill?

Kids’ answers:

• “I felt like I was saving the world.”

• “I felt like people really listened to me and respected my opinion - it was cherished.”
One of my greatest lessons I learned was that you can learn outside of school AND without using any electronics! All you need are your eyes, ears, and skin.
“…the help that [Growing Up Boulder gave] connecting us to resources was beyond any program we have ever worked with. Staff was also helpful in connecting the project to our curriculum...”

-Cathy Z.
“…Your work is SO influential to getting youth voices involved in city projects; I will be forever changed as a professional…[I] am excited to figure out how to make the students’ ideas come to fruition on the ground. Thank you!!”
How will the children’s input be used?

- **Website and video**
  - Impact at global level: supports United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals

- **Report used for city planning**
  - Impact at systems level

- **Be creative!**
  - Impact at individual level & site-specific level

- **Stay on the trail to save the animals of Gunbarrel Hill!**

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(part of the Gunbarrel Hill Integrated Site Project)

Written by: Growing Up Boulder
December 2020

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Heatherwood 4th Grade Project

Welcome to a website that will teach you many things! It includes facts about Native Americans, the people who first lived on this land and what they experienced and where they are today. There are also facts about Gunbarrel Hill and some awesome facts about the Wood Brothers project introduced to us by Growing Up Boulder and Open Space and Mountain Parks. Another cool fact is that this is all done by kids! In fact, I am a kid!

This year we’re lucky to have the chance to visit two open space sites. The first site was the Wood Brothers site across from Heatherwood’s playground. We were asked by Ashley from Growing Up Boulder and Open Space and Mountain Parks to give suggestions by saying how we liked to learn outside and activities we would like on the site. They really listened to our ideas!

The other site was Gunbarrel Hill. We learned about preserved ecosytems and ways of being stewards of the land. Gunbarrel Hill is home to threatened animals such as the grasshopper sparrow and the northern shrike as well as you’re greatest that are important food and habitat sources. OSMP wants to maintain unaltered fields and to get us kids to help educate the public about the land and how to take care of the land. We got to help design the signs.

We hope you enjoy your visit to our site. Thank you for visiting!
Growing Up Boulder - Trainings

- Participatory Planning with Young People
- A child-friendly city map: how and why to make one in your community

Visit [www.growingupboulder.org/services](http://www.growingupboulder.org/services) or contact info@growingupboulder.org
Building Partnerships

Elkhorn Slough Foundation, Hall District Elementary School, California State University Monterey Bay
Elkhorn Slough: Wetland of International Importance

Photo: Elkhorn Slough Foundation
Phase 1

Two CSUMB student capstone projects
5. What does a ranger do?

It tells us about the habitat.

6. I feel like a ranger of Carneros Creek when I:

give a tour to kids.
My favorite memory from the outdoor classroom is: _seen the bees_

because _it was cool seen them come in and out._

Draw your memory here:

First Name: _Daniela_ Grade: _4th_
My favorite memory from the outdoor classroom is: *when I saw a snake* because *it was black and yellow and it was my first time seeing one.*

First Name: **Ramon**  
Grade: **3rd**
My favorite memory from the outdoor classroom is: ___________.

because ___________

Draw your memory here:

First Name: ___________  Grade: ___________
Space for Dreaming
Building Partnerships

California State University Monterey Bay and Los Arboles Middle School
An elective class – with 3 student assistants
An elective class – with 3 student assistants
Teach with physical activities

Make Connections

Students in charge of learning

A capstone class – with 24 undergraduates
Student-Led Tours

“We like to hang out in this area with our friends before breaking out into groups.

This is a nice place and would like to see more like these around campus”

“We are really proud of our trophies and our painted lockers.

Inside those windows is our library.”
Collaborative Agreements & Planning
“I’m so proud of myself!”

“I feel connected to my community”

“Helped me learn how to use all types of techniques that will help me later on in life”
Kianni’s Reflections
Child and youth participatory planning initiatives

Formality of relationships

- formal
- informal

Number of partnerships

- few
- many

UNICEF USA Child-friendly city initiatives (UUSA CFCI)
Growing Up Boulder (GUB)
California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB)
Child and youth participatory planning initiatives

Formality of relationships

- Formal
- Informal

Number of partnerships

- Few
- Many

- UNICEF USA Child-friendly city initiatives (UUSA CFCI)
- Growing Up Boulder (GUB)
- California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB)
EE in the 1980s

EE in the 2020s

- intensified threats to the planet’s life systems
- opportunities to learn collective action are urgent
- new emphasis on social justice and inclusion
planetary conditions under which humans evolved

? an uncertain future
constructive hope—

hope that looks risks in the face and finds meaning in action, escaping denial, paralyzing despair and apathy

Ways to help young people build constructive hope—

• Create safe spaces where young people can share environmental emotions and ideas

• Enable young people to learn what they can do as individuals that can have positive impacts

• Show young people that they are not alone, that other people share their concerns and they are taking action too

• Enable young people to take collective action together