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
participating in groups that improve communities or natural areas

Columbia Families in Nature planting trees for Howard County Recreation & Parks, MD
Placemaking with Children and Youth
Participatory Practices For Planning Sustainable Communities

Victoria Derr, Louise Chawla & Mara Mintzer
New Village Press, 2018
416 pages
winner of the Environmental & Design Research Association & Achievement Award in 2019 &
NAAEE, 2017

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https://naaee.org/eepro/publication/community-engagement-guidelines
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
Growing Up Boulder (GUB) is Boulder’s child and youth-friendly city initiative (CYNDC 20 YRS).

**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.

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Community Engagement Design & Research

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER

Boulder Valley School District
Excellence and Equity

City of Boulder
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
Child Friendly Cities Initiative

Today, the initiative reaches approximately 30 million children in 40 countries worldwide.

Austria

The right to be heard

The right to social services

The right to be safe

Korea

The right to be valued, respected and treated fairly

United Arab Emirates

The right to family life, play and leisure

Mozambique

© Christian Schwier / Fotolia

© UNICEF Korea

© United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)

© Sharjah Girl Guides

© UNICEF Mozambique
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
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)
Growing Up Boulder - Model

- Synthesize & Share
- Establish Children as Experts
- Increase Children's Competence
- City & Community Partner Dialogue
- City Introduction & Framework
- 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

Wood Brothers Student Engagement (2020-2021 School Year)

Gunbarrel Hill Student Art Project (Spring 2021)

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)
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?

- Signs created from kids’ art
  - Impact at individual level & site-specific level

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

- Report used for city planning
  - Impact at systems level

- Impact at global level: supports United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals
• Participatory Planning with Young People

• A child-friendly city map: how and why to make one in your community

Visit 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
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: **Sitting in the sun**

because **I was learning.**

Draw your memory here.

First Name: [Name] Grade: [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
A capstone class – with 24 undergraduates

Teach with physical activities

Make Connections

Students in charge of learning
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”
Child and youth participatory planning initiatives

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Informal

Number of partnerships

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Many

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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