



Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

M.L. 2023 Approved Work Plan

General Information

ID Number: 2023-135

Staff Lead: Michael Varien

Date this document submitted to LCCMR: June 5, 2023

Project Title: Minnesota Community Schoolyards

Project Budget: \$1,433,000

Project Manager Information

Name: Eric Weiss

Organization: The Trust for Public Land

Office Telephone: (651) 999-5306

Email: eric.weiss@tpl.org

Web Address: <https://www.tpl.org/>

Project Reporting

Date Work Plan Approved by LCCMR: June 22, 2023

Reporting Schedule: April 1 / October 1 of each year.

Project Completion: June 30, 2026

Final Report Due Date: August 14, 2026

Legal Information

Legal Citation: M.L. 2023, Chp. 60, Art. 2, Sec. 2, Subd. 08i

Appropriation Language: \$1,433,000 the first year is from the trust fund to the commissioner of natural resources for an agreement with The Trust for Public Land to engage students and communities to create nature-focused habitat improvements at schoolyards across the state to increase environmental outcomes and encourage outdoor learning.

Appropriation End Date: June 30, 2026

Narrative

Project Summary: Minnesota Community Schoolyards will create at least 10 nature-focused habitat improvement projects at schoolyards across the state; engage students and the community in environmental stewardship; and encourage outdoor learning.

Describe the opportunity or problem your proposal seeks to address. Include any relevant background information.

Minnesota's schools face many environmental, learning, and social challenges, including habitat and tree canopy loss; flooded and muddy fields; extreme heat and rain events; learning loss; classroom behavioral issues; amplified screen time; and disconnection from the outdoors.

Only a fraction of Minnesota's 2,500 schoolyards are designed to protect and preserve the environment. Conventional schoolyard design can unintentionally contribute to Minnesota's environmental challenges. In fact, many schoolyards are often hotter than the surrounding neighborhood due to the lack of shade trees and the presence of hard surfaces. A survey conducted by TPL found that only 4% of school administrators reported well-shaded playgrounds.

And our students are less connected to nature than even a generation ago. In recent years, time spent outdoors has plummeted while screen time, behavioral issues, isolation, and mental health issues have skyrocketed. The correlation to achievement gaps, teacher burnout, and parent exhaustion is not lost. The lack of adequate facilities like outdoor classrooms and learning habitats prevents teachers from bringing students outdoors to learn, explore, and burn off energy.

One of the best strategies to address these issues is beyond the classroom – and out in the schoolyard. Our schoolyards deserve overdue attention. They need an outdoor boost.

What is your proposed solution to the problem or opportunity discussed above? Introduce us to the work you are seeking funding to do. You will be asked to expand on this proposed solution in Activities & Milestones.

The benefits of time outdoors are immense. When children spend more time outdoors, behavior issues drop, and learning improves. Outdoor experiences help students better understand their environment, develop skills, and improve long-term civic behaviors. More time learning outdoors makes better students and helps lay the foundation for future generations of nature stewards. The best connections happen without WiFi. It's not only nice to step away from our screens sometimes but necessary.

TPL's Community Schoolyard program engages students in designing new outdoor spaces. Students explore and apply environmental topics to a place they care about – their schoolyard. This impactful project-based learning model highlights the power of civic involvement, collaboration, and environmental stewardship.

Moreover, it untaps the ecological potential of the land on which schools sit. Schools will be able to choose from a menu of environmental site improvements, including but limited to landscaping, habitat, stormwater management, trees, mini-forests, outdoor classrooms, gardens, nature play, green roofs, porous surfaces, and hard surface removal.

Currently, TPL has two active schoolyard projects in Faribault and Brooklyn Center. Schools from Lake City to Alexandria, South St. Paul to St. Cloud and Walnut Grove have expressed interest in participating if funding is available.

What are the specific project outcomes as they relate to the public purpose of protection, conservation, preservation, and enhancement of the state's natural resources?

1. Fund the development of 10 nature-based Community Schoolyard projects. Projects will include community-designed improvements that enhance air, water, and habitat and the expanded enjoyment of the outdoors and natural resources.

2. Engage students, teachers, and community in the design of new schoolyard spaces. This includes education about the importance, need, and impact of nature incorporation at school sites.
3. Build program awareness; provide schools with resources; build a network of schools and organizations advancing nature-based schoolyard projects
4. Evaluate project impact and outcomes

Project Location

What is the best scale for describing where your work will take place?

Statewide

What is the best scale to describe the area impacted by your work?

Statewide

When will the work impact occur?

During the Project and In the Future

Activities and Milestones

Activity 1: Local nature-based schoolyard improvements selected through competitive RFP

Activity Budget: \$808,000

Activity Description:

A statewide survey of school administrators revealed that two out of three schools expressed interest in the Community Schoolyards initiative. Through a competitive RFP process, we'll select at least 10 school sites to participate in the program and receive funding for nature-based habitat projects. Funding will be available at two levels.

Level Two sites, limited to 4 projects, will receive approximately \$150,000 for nature-based improvements. Additionally, they'll receive TPL support with classroom curriculum and project-based learning, project management, design technical assistance, an immersive learning field trip to support student learning and exploration, and stewardship and activation guidance.

Level One project sites, intended to be quick and agile, will receive approximately \$25,000 for nature-based improvements. Additional support will be provided to school sites, but not as extensively as Level Two sites. We anticipate supporting 6 Level One projects.

Sites will be selected based upon:

1. Geographic diversity – at least half dedicated to Greater Minnesota school sites
2. Local needs based upon TPL's statewide assessment
3. Strength of partnerships, readiness, and local funding match

Schools will be expected to secure long-term maintenance commitments, regular use of outdoor classrooms, and provide community access outside of regular school hours.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Development of grant criteria, application process, and release Cohort 1 RFP	July 31, 2023
Cohort 1: Review and score proposals, select four (4) Level Two project sites	September 30, 2023
Cohort 1: Finalize school site work plans, timeline, budgets, partnership agreements, and contracts	October 31, 2023
Cohort 2: Release RFP	February 28, 2024
Cohort 1: Student Leader Class field trips	June 30, 2024
Cohort 2: Review and score proposals, select six (6) Level One project sites	July 31, 2024
Cohort 1: Work with schools to complete and finalize schoolyard designs, budgets, and secure approvals	October 31, 2024
Cohort 2: Finalize school site work plans, timeline, budgets, partnership agreements, and contracts	October 31, 2024
Cohort 2: Work with schools to complete and secure schoolyard designs, budgets, and approvals	May 31, 2025
Cohort 1: Complete construction of demonstration projects, celebrate schoolyard grand opening	September 30, 2025
Cohort 2: Complete construction of demonstration projects, celebrate schoolyard grand opening	September 30, 2025
Cohort 1: Collect and share lessons learned, evaluations, and success stories	June 30, 2026

Activity 2: School support, technical assistance, and educational programming

Activity Budget: \$539,000

Activity Description:

Building a community schoolyard is impactful enough. But engaging students in the design of that schoolyard space is a

lifelong learning opportunity. TPL’s unique approach leverages the undertaking as a project-based learning opportunity. With lessons taught by TPL, students learn about natural resources while exploring the design process and related trades/careers in construction, design, engineering and land management.

In addition to its expertise, TPL will engage a contracted landscape architect to offer design solutions and project support as needed. Children & Nature Network, with its focus on school policy, will be on-hand to share policy solutions that support greater use of the outdoors.

To highlight the support of LCCMR, signs will be provided to each of the 10 project sites. Level Two sites will receive support to activate and maintain the site. Grand opening celebrations will bring project awareness while gathering community members, local leaders, and media.

Additionally, TPL will provide limited technical assistance to non-funded schools/districts interested in pursuing schoolyard projects and policies. These efforts will support local leaders, expand the number of schools planning for eventual nature-based improvements, and integrate environmental stewardship into school curriculum.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
Prepare and execute lesson plans/project-based learning and site programming plans	October 31, 2024
Conduct classroom learning, participatory planning and design efforts with Cohort 1	May 31, 2025
Support data analysis, resource dissemination, and technical assistance	June 30, 2026
Provide technical assistance to nascent Community Schoolyard programs	June 30, 2026

Activity 3: Building statewide momentum through cross-sector partnership, outreach, and education

Activity Budget: \$86,000

Activity Description:

Since 2020, TPL-Minnesota has convened a multidisciplinary advisory committee that has fostered the development of the Minnesota Community Schoolyards program. Members represent conservation and natural resource organizations, education, public health, nonprofits, and state agencies. The Advisory Committee supports schoolyard programs, policies, and initiatives; supports evaluation and data collection; disseminates resources to program partners; and connects interested individuals and organizations. The Advisory Committee will continue to pursue efforts to sustain and expand the program’s impact, leading to long-term statewide implementation.

We’ll host a Community Schoolyard convening with school partners to build momentum and local capacity. The convening will gather school leaders, technical experts, and outdoor champions to build understanding and awareness; share best practices; and build statewide networks. This will be an opportunity for funded projects to share lessons learned and celebrate success. To showcase the LCCMR-funded schoolyard project at Jefferson Elementary, the event will be held in Faribault, MN.

Finally, this activity will include efforts to build awareness of the benefits of nature-based habitat improvement projects, outdoor learning, and engagement. We’ll gather marketing materials and resources to share with partners. The statewide schoolyard assessment conducted in 2021 will be updated.

Activity Milestones:

Description	Approximate Completion Date
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Hold Year 1 quarterly Advisory Committee meetings	June 30, 2024
Hold Year 2 quarterly Advisory Committee meetings	June 30, 2025
Begin convening planning	August 31, 2025
Host Community Schoolyards Convening	May 31, 2026
Update statewide schoolyard assessment and survey	June 30, 2026
Hold Year 3 quarterly Advisory Committee meetings	June 30, 2026
Maintain Minnesota Community Schoolyards website	June 30, 2026

Project Partners and Collaborators

Name	Organization	Role	Receiving Funds
Jaime Zaplatosch	Children & Nature Network (C&NN)	Children & Nature Network will be on the Advisory Committee. Jaime will provide technical assistance to the school districts undertaking schoolyard projects. She will help facilitate the advisory committee and other statewide planning efforts alongside TPL. C&NN leads a global movement to increase children's access to nature.	Yes
Jeremy Vann	Minnesota Department of Health - SHIP	Advisory Committee member representing Minnesota Department of Health Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP). SHIP supports community-driven solutions to expand opportunities for active living, healthy eating and commercial tobacco-free living, working directly with local SHIP staff who represent 41 Community Health Boards, covering all 87 counties.	No
Jonee Brigham Kulhman	University of Minnesota - GreenStep Schools	Advisory Committee member representing GreenStep Schools which is a free and voluntary statewide best practices framework and recognition program for public and private K-12 schools and districts to reduce environmental impact and costs, and provide effective environmental and sustainability education. GreenStep Schools is housed at the University of Minnesota.	No
Laura Duffey	Minnesota Department of Natural Resources - School Forests	Advisory Committee member representing Minnesota Department of Natural Resources - School Forests Program. The Minnesota School Forest Program is a partnership between the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and Minnesota schools. The program provides a variety of benefits to increase outdoor education activities.	No
Anna Lynn	Minnesota Department of Health	Advisory Committee member representing Minnesota Department of Health Child and Family Health (CFH) division. CFH provides collaborative public health leadership that supports and strengthens systems to ensure healthy families and communities.	No
Jill Chamberlain	Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota	Advisory Committee member representing a community-oriented business perspective, preventative health expert with deep statewide connections and experience with Safe Routes to School work. The Center for Prevention works statewide tackling the leading causes of preventable disease to increase health equity, transform communities, and create a healthier Minnesota.	No
Dave Cowan	Minnesota Department of Transportation - Safe Routes to School	Advisory Committee member representing Minnesota Department of Transportation - Safe Routes to School.	No
TBD - Recent Retirement	Minnesota Department of Education	Advisory Committee member representing classroom curriculum standards.	No

Dissemination

Describe your plans for dissemination, presentation, documentation, or sharing of data, results, samples, physical collections, and other products and how they will follow ENRTF Acknowledgement Requirements and Guidelines.

We have several dissemination plans, including resource creation and distribution, attending and presenting at existing conferences and webinars, maintaining a project website, hosting the schoolyard advisory committee, creating a project video, providing technical assistance to new schoolyard programs, and hosting a convening of project partners. Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund will be acknowledged through the use of the trust fund logo or attribution language on project print and electronic media, the Minnesota Community Schoolyards website, publications, signage, and other communications per the ENRTF Acknowledgment Guidelines.

Long-Term Implementation and Funding

Describe how the results will be implemented and how any ongoing effort will be funded. If not already addressed as part of the project, how will findings, results, and products developed be implemented after project completion? If additional work is needed, how will this work be funded?

We envision a future where Community Schoolyards become the standard practice for outdoor school spaces, serving as a hub for improved education and health, nature-based resiliency, civic involvement, and environmental stewardship. The Minnesota-based projects we propose will demonstrate opportunities, grow awareness, and create resources, helping to bring the schoolyard model to additional Minnesota school districts.

We are exploring federal, state, and local funding sources that could further Community Schoolyards work and supportive policies like shared-use agreements and design guidelines. As a nonprofit, we are also pursuing private funding opportunities and matches to support program expansion.

Other ENRTF Appropriations Awarded in the Last Six Years

Name	Appropriation	Amount Awarded
Minnesota Green Schoolyards	M.L. 2021, First Special Session, Chp. 6, Art. 6, Sec. 2, Subd. 08g	\$250,000

Budget Summary

Category / Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Purpose	Gen. Ineligible	% Benefits	# FTE	Classified Staff?	\$ Amount
Personnel								
Program Staff		Project management and support, classroom learning delivery, technical assistance provider, advisory committee coordination, data analysis support			48%	1.5		\$229,000
Research & Innovation Evaluator		Evaluation of schoolyard site projects and statewide assessment			48%	0.05		\$8,000
Project Assistant		Project and community engagement support, technical assistance			48%	1.5		\$185,000
Legal Staff		Legal documents and agreements			48%	0.1		\$12,000
Finance Staff		Finance support, invoicing			48%	0.15		\$21,000
							Sub Total	\$455,000
Contracts and Services								
Children & Nature Network	Professional or Technical Service Contract	Capacity building, advisory committee and network support, technical assistance, communications support, resource creation.				0.06		\$10,000
Undetermined	Professional or Technical Service Contract	Landscape architecture and engineering consultant to support site-specific schoolyard design.				0.5		\$160,000
TBD School Partners - 4	Sub award	Four schools will be selected to receive Level 2 nature-based improvement project support at \$155,000 each - \$150,000 for site improvements and \$5,000 for project management and coordination. Documented and reported through tracking sheet and project photography.				0.12		\$620,000
TBD School Partners - 6	Sub award	Six schools will be selected to receive Level 1 nature-based improvement project support at \$25,000 each - \$24,000 for site improvements and \$1,000 for project management and coordination. Documented and reported through tracking sheet and project photography.				0.12		\$150,000

							Sub Total	\$940,000
Equipment, Tools, and Supplies								
	Tools and Supplies	Classroom teaching aids	Supplies for student learning, projects, and classroom exercises.					\$2,000
							Sub Total	\$2,000
Capital Expenditures								
							Sub Total	-
Acquisitions and Stewardship								
							Sub Total	-
Travel In Minnesota								
	Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	Estimation - Number of miles dependent on project locations. Assume at least two on-site check-ins for Level 1 projects and ten on-site meetings for Level 2 projects.	Check-in, classroom delivery, and engagement meetings/events.					\$6,000
	Conference Registration Miles/ Meals/ Lodging	Estimation - one conference presentations	Presentation at one conference to build awareness, share lessons	X				\$2,000
							Sub Total	\$8,000
Travel Outside Minnesota								
							Sub Total	-
Printing and Publication								
	Printing	Printing of project materials, engagement boards, resources	Student workbooks, teacher resources, display boards, hand outs, maps, and other engagement					\$5,000
							Sub Total	\$5,000

Other Expenses								
		Student field trips - 4	Opportunity for Level 2 school site "Student Leader Class" students to see nature-based improvements or project, learn about the environment. Location TBD.					\$8,000
		School Signs - 10	Display LCCMR-support, highlight project as Community Schoolyard					\$5,000
		Resource creation and dissemination	Would include website, social media, written documentation, 'how to' guide, and initiative video					\$10,000
							Sub Total	\$23,000
							Grand Total	\$1,433,000

Classified Staff or Generally Ineligible Expenses

Category/Name	Subcategory or Type	Description	Justification Ineligible Expense or Classified Staff Request
Travel In Minnesota	Conference Registration Miles/Meals/Lodging	Estimation - one conference presentations	Dissemination of project findings, resources, and awareness-building

Non ENRTF Funds

Category	Specific Source	Use	Status	\$ Amount
State				
In-Kind	Statewide Health Improvement Program	Advisory Committee Membership (2 members)	Secured	\$6,000
In-Kind	School Forest Program	Advisory Committee Membership	Pending	\$3,000
In-Kind	Department of Education	Advisory Committee Membership	Pending	\$3,000
			State Sub Total	\$12,000
Non-State				
Cash	Local School Match	Schools selected for funding will be expected to secure a local match - \$15,000-\$25,000 for Level 2 projects and \$2,500 for Level 1 projects.	Potential	\$70,000
In-Kind	Blue Cross Blue Shield	Blue Cross is supporting the development of TPL Community Schoolyards program	Secured	\$75,000
Cash	Private Philanthropy	TPL will work to fundraise for expansion of habitat projects and maintenance	Potential	\$300,000
In-Kind	Operational expenses - nonprofit and private partners (estimate 4 partners, over 3 years)	Advisory Committee Membership	Potential	\$12,000
			Non State Sub Total	\$457,000
			Funds Total	\$469,000

Attachments

Required Attachments

Visual Component

File: [16026186-f41.pdf](#)

Alternate Text for Visual Component

Visual display of potential schoolyard improvements and outcomes, including project-based learning, career exploration, nature stewardship, water capture, habitat, outdoor learning, tree canopy, science gardens, and nature play. Provide project website: <https://www.tpl.org/our-work/minnesota-healthy-community-schoolyards...>

Financial Capacity

File: [6a545f59-975.pdf](#)

Board Resolution or Letter

Title	File
TPL Letter Authorizing LCCMR Proposal	fcd57695-190.docx

Optional Attachments

Support Letter, Photos, Media, Other

Title	File
National Park Service - Letter of Support	6a46b007-09c.pdf
Children & Nature Network - Letter of Support	1e4a2872-f3d.pdf
Brooklyn Center Elementary - Letter of Support	48585c76-147.docx
Jefferson Elementary Faribault - Letter of Support	5baf50b1-d8f.docx
Project Tracking Sheet	150b2bfd-ff1.xlsx
Signed Background Check	ba0fd25a-367.pdf

Difference between Proposal and Work Plan

Describe changes from Proposal to Work Plan Stage

To better accommodate the window of construction during the summer months and better support schools, we've extended our project from two to three years. Due to rising inflation and project costs, we've adjusted the total number of projects and allocated more funding to Level Two projects. We've also reallocated some of our budget to add resources to Activity 2: School Support and Technical Assistance. We've learned from our initial demonstration schoolyards in Faribault and Brooklyn Center that more staff time has been needed to provide technical assistance and support engagement and programming.

Additional Acknowledgements and Conditions:

The following are acknowledgements and conditions beyond those already included in the above workplan:

Do you understand and acknowledge the ENRTF repayment requirements if the use of capital equipment changes?

N/A

Do you agree travel expenses must follow the "Commissioner's Plan" promulgated by the Commissioner of Management of Budget or, for University of Minnesota projects, the University of Minnesota plan?

Yes, I agree to the Commissioner's Plan.

Does your project have potential for royalties, copyrights, patents, or sale of products and assets?

No

Do you understand and acknowledge IP and revenue-return and sharing requirements in 116P.10?

N/A

Do you wish to request reinvestment of any revenues into your project instead of returning revenue to the ENRTF?

N/A

Does your project include original, hypothesis-driven research?

No

Does the organization have a fiscal agent for this project?

No