

Regional Initiative Helps Open School Grounds After School Hours, Creating Safe Environments Where Children Can Play

In low-income communities, whether urban or rural, parks and other outdoor play areas can be scarce. Often the only safe space where children can engage in vigorous physical activity are the playgrounds and athletic fields at neighborhood schools, but too many of California's school grounds are closed after school hours.

In an ambitious effort to open school gates and make it easier for people to be active and healthy, San Joaquin Valley residents have been working with school officials and the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) to overcome fears and policy barriers that may be standing in the way.

"Most often, the gates to schools' outdoor play areas are locked due to two main concerns—liability and vandalism," says Genoveva Islas-Hooker, regional coordinator for the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP), an eight-county partnership that takes an environmental approach to obesity prevention. Co-funded by The California



Instead of dancing under the hot summer sun, young participants in Pixley's Ballet Folklórico now practice on public school grounds, thanks to a joint use agreement with the local district.

Endowment, CCROPP works to make underserved communities in the San Joaquin Valley places where families have more opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity.

A longtime health educator who grew up in the Central Valley, Islas-Hooker understands the children's dilemma. "I grew up in small rural communities where there often were no swimming pools, so my brothers and I would swim in the canal. It was dangerous but it was the only place we had to swim," Islas-Hooker recalls.

"School playgrounds are safe places for children to play, and rather than locking kids out, we need to be working together to open up this space for their use, whether through formal joint use agreements or by institutionalizing policies that make the green space open to public use."

Susan Elizabeth, a CCROPP Community Lead, works with schools and community-based organizations to find creative and low-cost ways to improve the local food and physical activity environment. Through door-to-door surveys and community

San Joaquin's Joint Use of School Grounds (Continued)

meetings, she learned that residents saw schools as “one of the biggest social assets in town—green space owned by the people who pay taxes,” says Elizabeth. “Schools and residents also have a common interest in providing safe places to play, helping kids come to school healthy and ready to learn.”

Starting small, Elizabeth facilitated a series of meetings at a single school—Pixley Elementary in Tulare County—bringing the principal and school board members together with a risk management expert specializing in school liability issues, who had also served as the broker for the school district’s insurance policy. Together, they quickly moved past fear-based assumptions to a deeper fact-based understanding of what was possible, and worked out a joint use agreement. Joint use is the sharing of resources such as outdoor and indoor spaces by two or more entities—for example, a school or a park and a city or private organization—in order to keep costs down and communities healthy.

“When it comes to using school space whether it be through joint use or informal policies unlocking school space, the liability issue can be a showstopper,” says Elizabeth. “But CCROPP has been able to dig

deeper for the facts to solve the liability issue, and used community voices to persuade decision makers. We learned that existing insurance coverage—through the school, the district, and the region—was already sufficient to cover anything that might happen on school grounds. As part of a larger risk pool of 17 school districts, and covered by additional protection at the county and state level, the school was already well-protected for liability. It was eye-opening for school administrators, who by the end of that meeting essentially said, ‘We thought we were protecting ourselves by closing our gates, but can now see that we’re protected even if we open our gates—and so they did.’”

Ample insurance is not the only thing that affords schools’ protection. “By opening up our green space to our community members who use and value that access, they develop pride in ownership,” says Pixley Elementary School Principal Dr. Saddle Nishitani. The presence of families and children on school grounds after-hours and on weekends actually serves as a deterrent to vandalism.

Today, Pixley youth enjoy access to the school’s soccer field and basketball court; adults go there to walk or jog, or to picnic

with their families under shade trees. A *Ballet Folklórico* dance group, *Los Girasoles*—bringing youth participants both cultural and health benefits—now practices at the school instead of on a sun-scorched, crumbling concrete lot in summer temperatures well over 100 degrees. And, Elizabeth proudly notes, “In the two years since Pixley opened its school gates, *no* liability issues have arisen and there has been *no* increase in vandalism or litter.”

CCROPP has begun working with residents and school officials in nearby Earlimart School District where more than three acres of unused open space may be developed as extended play space for students, a community park, and a flood-water retention basin. CCROPP is also collaborating at the state level, as a participant in the Joint Use Statewide Taskforce (JUST), and with national organizations like the National Association of Elected Officials (NALEO) to encourage and provide information resources to support the sharing of space between schools and communities. A regional joint use summit is planned for February 2010 to further dispel myths, address challenges, and expand support for the Public Access to School Space (PASS) initiative.

San Joaquin's Joint Use of School Grounds *(Continued)*

The Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP) is the Central California Public Health Partnership's initiative to create environments that support healthy eating and active living in the San Joaquin Valley. The regional obesity prevention program is administered by the Central California Center for Health and Human Services and is housed under the College of Health and Human Services at California State University, Fresno. CCROPP is funded by The California Endowment.

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Joint Use web site: www.jointuse.org

Plus: View joint use success stories on video—“Success Spotlight” features Fresno, Pixley, and Chula Vista: www.jointuse.org/resources/success-spotlight