



# Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund

2023 Request for Proposal

## General Information

**Proposal ID:** 2023-135

**Proposal Title:** Minnesota Community Schoolyards

## Project Manager Information

**Name:** Eric Weiss

**Organization:** The Trust for Public Land

**Office Telephone:** (651) 999-5306

**Email:** eric.weiss@tpl.org

## Project Basic Information

**Project Summary:** Minnesota Community Schoolyards will create at least 24 nature-focused habitat improvement projects at schoolyards across the state; engage students and the community in environmental stewardship; and encourage outdoor learning.

**Funds Requested:** \$1,630,000

**Proposed Project Completion:** June 30, 2025

**LCCMR Funding Category:** Methods to Protect, Restore, and Enhance Land, Water, and Habitat (F)

## 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

## Narrative

### **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 it 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 pollinator 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 at least 24 nature-based Community Schoolyard projects. Distribute projects evenly between Greater Minnesota and the metro area to ensure a mix of geographic and project types.
2. Support funded school sites with classroom learning, technical assistance, programmatic support, and project capacity to increase success, impact, and student engagement
3. Build program awareness; provide non-funded schools with resources; and build networks to increase impact and collaboration statewide
4. Continue building momentum for Community Schoolyard initiative so that every Minnesota child has access to a

park-like, nature-focused schoolyard space.

5. Evaluate project impact and outcomes

## Activities and Milestones

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

**Activity Budget:** \$1,045,000

**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 24 school sites to participate in the program and to receive funding for nature-based habitat projects. Funding will be available at two levels – large and small improvement projects.

Large project sites, limited to 8 projects, will receive approximately \$75,000 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.

Small project sites, intended to be quick and agile, will receive approximately \$25,000 for nature-based improvements. Additional supports will be provided to school sites, but not as extensively as large sites. We anticipate supporting 16 small 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   | Completion Date    |
|---|--------------------|
| Development of grant criteria, application process, and release RFP                       | July 31, 2023      |
| Review and score proposals, select at least 24 project sites                              | September 30, 2023 |
| Finalize school site work plans, timeline, budgets, partnership agreements, and contracts | October 31, 2023   |
| Work with schools to complete and secure schoolyard designs, budgets, and approvals       | April 30, 2024     |
| Complete construction of demonstration projects, celebrate schoolyard grand opening       | August 31, 2024    |
| Collect and share lessons learned, evaluations, and success stories                       | June 30, 2025      |

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

**Activity Budget:** \$490,000

**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 curriculum 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 on an as-needed basis. 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 24 project sites. Large 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  | Completion Date  |
|--|------------------|
| Prepare and execute curriculum/project-based learning and site programming plans | October 31, 2023 |
| Conduct classroom learning, participatory planning and design efforts            | May 31, 2024     |
| Support data analysis, resource dissemination, and technical assistance          | June 30, 2025    |
| Provide technical assistance to nascent Community Schoolyard programs            | June 30, 2025    |

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

**Activity Budget:** \$95,000

**Activity Description:**

TPL has schoolyard programs in 13 states. We're proud to have added Minnesota to our portfolio of nearly 300 schoolyard projects. 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.

The Advisory Committee will host a first-ever Community Schoolyard convening to build momentum and local capacity. The mini-conference will gather school leaders, technical experts, and outdoor champions to build understanding and awareness; share best practices; and build statewide networks. 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 in 2024.

**Activity Milestones:**

| Description  | Completion Date   |
|--|-------------------|
| Update statewide schoolyard assessment and survey                      | December 31, 2024 |
| Host Community Schoolyards Mini-Conference                             | May 31, 2025      |
| Hold regular Advisory Committee meetings                               | June 30, 2025     |
| Secure additional project funding through public and private resources | June 30, 2025     |
| Maintain Minnesota Community Schoolyards website                       | June 30, 2025     |

## 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              |
| Karen Harrison          | 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              |

## 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 funding sources at the federal, state, and local levels that could further Community Schoolyards work

and supportive policies like shared-use agreements and design guidelines. As a nonprofit, we are certainly 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      |

## Project Manager and Organization Qualifications

**Project Manager Name:** Eric Weiss

**Job Title:** Program Director, Community-Powered Parks

**Provide description of the project manager’s qualifications to manage the proposed project.**

As a certified city planner, Eric's natural ability is to identify problems, seek solutions, bring people together, and view a topic from a holistic and future-oriented perspective. He has over 16 years of professional experience and has enjoyed working with communities in rural, suburban, and urban settings. He has taken his community planning background to roles in the public, nonprofit, private, and philanthropic sectors. Much of his work has been in project and program management, with particular attention paid to long-range planning, community engagement, parks planning, grants management, zoning, and public policy. Eric has been a member of countless collaborative initiatives, both as a committee member, staff member, and chair. As program director of TPL's Community Powered Parks program, Eric leads The Trust for Public Land’s Community Schoolyards Program in Minnesota. Eric holds an M.A. in Urban Planning from Minnesota State University, Mankato. In addition to his community planning career, Eric has professional and volunteer experience in the youth development field. He is supported by Susan Schmidt, Minnesota State Director, who has been with TPL for more than 20 years, and the many other TPL community schoolyards program managers across the country.

**Organization:** The Trust for Public Land

**Organization Description:**

At Trust for Public Land (TPL), we’re connecting everyone to the outdoors. Our mission is to create parks and protect land for people, ensuring healthy, livable communities for generations to come. We’re committed to creating more places that bring us outside—parks, trails, schoolyards, and public lands—and making them available and welcoming to everyone, everywhere. We partner with local communities to plan their conservation priorities, fund their visions for landscapes, create the parks and trails they value and protect the lands and waters critical to community health. While TPL places a major focus on improving public access and protecting land for people, we also take very seriously the critical environmental benefits our work provides. Since 1972, TPL has preserved more than 3.5 million acres, created or transformed close to 2,000 parks, playgrounds, and gardens, and developed more than 2,000 miles of trails across the United States. Our schoolyards program has helped renovate hundreds of schoolyards across the country, with dozens of projects currently in the process of completion in cities like Atlanta, Dallas, and Denver and rural communities like Chiloquin, Oregon.

## Budget Summary

| Category / Name                       | Subcategory or Type                        | Description  | Purpose | Gen. Ineligible | % Benefits | # FTE | Classified Staff? | \$ Amount          |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|---------|-----------------|------------|-------|-------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Personnel</b>                      |  |  |         |                 |            |       |                   |                    |
| Program Staff                         |  | Project management and support, classroom learning delivery, technical assistance provider, advisory committee coordination, data analysis support |         |                 | 48%        | 1.4   |                   | \$194,000          |
| Research & Innovation Evaluator       |  | Evaluation of schoolyard site projects and statewide assessment  |         |                 | 48%        | 0.08  |                   | \$10,000           |
| Project Assistant                     |  | Project and community engagement support, technical assistance   |         |                 | 48%        | 1.12  |                   | \$100,000          |
| Legal Staff                           |  | Legal documents and agreements   |         |                 | 48%        | 0.1   |                   | \$20,000           |
| Finance Staff                         |  | Finance support, invoicing   |         |                 | 48%        | 0.1   |                   | \$20,000           |
|                                       |  |  |         |                 |            |       | <b>Sub Total</b>  | <b>\$344,000</b>   |
| <b>Contracts and Services</b>         |  |  |         |                 |            |       |                   |                    |
| Children & Nature Network             | Professional or Technical Service Contract | Capacity building, advisory committee and network support, technical assistance, communications support, resource creation.                        |         |                 |            | 0.2   |                   | \$26,000           |
| Undetermined                          | Professional or Technical Service Contract | Design-build landscape architecture consultant to support site-specific schoolyard design.   |         |                 |            | 0.8   |                   | \$100,000          |
| TBD School Partners - 8               | Sub award                                  | Eight schools will be selected to receive large nature-based improvement project support at approximately \$75,000 each.                           |         |                 |            | 4     |                   | \$600,000          |
| TBD School Partners - 16              | Sub award                                  | Sixteen schools will be selected to receive small nature-based improvement project support at approximately \$25,000 each.                         |         |                 |            | 3.2   |                   | \$400,000          |
|                                       |  |  |         |                 |            |       | <b>Sub Total</b>  | <b>\$1,126,000</b> |
| <b>Equipment, Tools, and Supplies</b> |  |  |         |                 |            |       |                   |                    |
|                                       |  |  |         |                 |            |       | <b>Sub Total</b>  | <b>-</b>           |



|                                     |   |  |   |  |  |  |                  |                 |
|-------------------------------------|---|--|---|--|--|--|------------------|-----------------|
| <b>Capital Expenditures</b>         |   |  |   |  |  |  |                  |                 |
|                                     |   |  |   |  |  |  | <b>Sub Total</b> | -               |
| <b>Acquisitions and Stewardship</b> |   |  |   |  |  |  |                  |                 |
|                                     |   |  |   |  |  |  | <b>Sub Total</b> | -               |
| <b>Travel In Minnesota</b>          |   |  |   |  |  |  |                  |                 |
|                                     | Miles/ Meals/ Lodging                         | Estimation - Number of miles dependent on project locations. Assume at least two check-ins for small projects and ten meetings for large projects. | Check-in, classroom delivery, and engagement meetings/events.   |  |  |  |                  | \$10,000        |
|                                     | Conference Registration Miles/ Meals/ Lodging | Estimation - one conference presentation   | Presentation at one conference to build awareness, share lessons  |  |  |  |                  | \$2,000         |
|                                     |   |  |   |  |  |  | <b>Sub Total</b> | <b>\$12,000</b> |
| <b>Travel Outside Minnesota</b>     |   |  |   |  |  |  |                  |                 |
|                                     |   |  |   |  |  |  | <b>Sub Total</b> | -               |
| <b>Printing and Publication</b>     |   |  |   |  |  |  |                  |                 |
|                                     | Printing                                      | School printing  | Classroom learning and resource printing for each of 24 schools   |  |  |  |                  | \$7,000         |
|                                     |   |  |   |  |  |  | <b>Sub Total</b> | <b>\$7,000</b>  |
| <b>Other Expenses</b>               |   |  |   |  |  |  |                  |                 |
|                                     |   | Stewardship and Activation - 8   | Grand opening celebration, maintenance of new spaces at large project sites                                       |  |  |  |                  | \$40,000        |
|                                     |   | Mini-conference. At least two attendees per school site.   | Sharing lessons learned, networking, highlight LCCMR-funded work. Includes travel, hotel, space rental, and food. |  |  |  |                  | \$50,000        |
|                                     |   | Student field trips - 8  | Opportunity for students to see nature-based improvements, learn about the environment                            |  |  |  |                  | \$20,000        |

|  |  |                                  |   |  |  |  |                    |                    |
|--|--|----------------------------------|---|--|--|--|--------------------|--------------------|
|  |  | School Signs - 24                | Display LCCMR-support, highlight project as Community Schoolyard      |  |  |  |                    | \$6,000            |
|  |  | Marketing and Awareness Campaign | Would include website, social media, written documentation, and video |  |  |  |                    | \$25,000           |
|  |  |                                  |   |  |  |  | <b>Sub Total</b>   | <b>\$141,000</b>   |
|  |  |                                  |   |  |  |  | <b>Grand Total</b> | <b>\$1,630,000</b> |

Classified Staff or Generally Ineligible Expenses

| Category/Name | Subcategory or Type | Description | Justification Ineligible Expense or Classified Staff Request |
|---------------|---------------------|-------------|--|
|---------------|---------------------|-------------|--|

## Non ENRTF Funds

| Category         | Specific Source        | Use  | Status                     | Amount           |
|------------------|------------------------|--|----------------------------|------------------|
| <b>State</b>     |                        |  |                            |                  |
|                  |                        |  | <b>State Sub Total</b>     | -                |
| <b>Non-State</b> |                        |  |                            |                  |
| Cash             | Local School Match     | Schools selected for funding will be expected to secure a local match - \$5,000 for large projects and \$2,500 for small projects. | Potential                  | \$80,000         |
| 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                  | \$200,000        |
|                  |                        |  | <b>Non State Sub Total</b> | <b>\$355,000</b> |
|                  |                        |  | <b>Funds Total</b>         | <b>\$355,000</b> |

## 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 | <a href="#">fcd57695-190.docx</a> |

### Optional Attachments

#### *Support Letter or Other*

| Title  | File                              |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| Brooklyn Center Elementary - Letter of Support     | <a href="#">48585c76-147.docx</a> |
| Jefferson Elementary Faribault - Letter of Support | <a href="#">5baf50b1-d8f.docx</a> |
| National Park Service - Letter of Support          | <a href="#">6a46b007-09c.pdf</a>  |
| Children & Nature Network - Letter of Support      | <a href="#">1e4a2872-f3d.pdf</a>  |

## Administrative Use

**Does your project include restoration or acquisition of land rights?**

No

**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

# MINNESOTA COMMUNITY SCHOOLYARDS PROJECT NO. 2023-135



TRUST FOR  
PUBLIC  
LAND™

**OUR SCHOOLYARDS DESERVE LONG  
OVERDUE ATTENTION.**

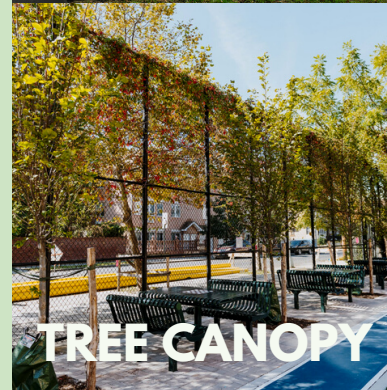
**THEY NEED AN OUTDOOR BOOST.**

**AND WE'RE GOING TO MAKE IT HAPPEN.**

Trust for Public Land's *Minnesota Community Schoolyards* program is working to connect everyone to the outdoors.

Community Schoolyards:

- Are designed to be nature-centered, park-like places
- Improve and protect the environment
- Foster next-generation nature stewards
- Create new outdoor learning environments
- Are designed by the students and the community through project-based learning opportunities
- Are open and welcoming to the public
- Include a variety of improvements to habitat, water, air, and learning.



Eric Weiss, Program Director - [eric.weiss@tpl.org](mailto:eric.weiss@tpl.org)  
Susan Schmidt, State Director -  
[susan.schmidt@tpl.org](mailto:susan.schmidt@tpl.org)

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT:  
[HTTPS://WWW.TPL.ORG/OUR-WORK/MINNESOTA-HEALTHY-  
COMMUNITY-SCHOOLYARDS](https://www.tpl.org/our-work/minnesota-healthy-community-schoolyards)