

# What are the first steps for creating a green schoolyard? How do I get the process started and who do I need to have on board?

Before touching spade to earth, there are many things to do to ensure the support, use, and sustainability of a school garden project. These first exploratory steps will help you understand if your school community is ready and ripe to begin the process.

## Do Your Homework

Contact local gardening organizations such as plant stores, garden clubs, botanical gardens, or ecology centers to see if they have a school gardening component. Spend time researching school gardens in your area, state, and country. In an online search, use key words like “outdoor classroom” and “school garden.” If you understand what is already happening in the school garden arena, you will be able to pitch your ideas more effectively.

If school gardens exist locally, visit them. Shadow the garden coordinator to get a sense of the management tactics and programmatic elements.

## Make the Pitch

The first task in building the foundation of a strong garden project is a sales pitch to the principal. A principal will appreciate a thorough outline of how this garden will work in concert with other school programs, integrate with core curriculum, and be of great use to the teachers as an outdoor classroom. As part of this pitch, include a preliminary design idea, a proposed garden location, a construction timeline, and a stewardship maintenance plan. Don’t forget to include an annual budget and fundraising strategy.

If you have already engaged and interested several teachers in the project, the principal will be more inclined to endorse and influence the project. Enlisting the support of several teachers will help you make your case.

We have found that most principals are easily brought on board and delighted to support a school garden when it is described as an outdoor classroom. However, because of often overwhelming workloads, they may support the project, but don’t want to be buried in an avalanche of details about it. Regular and concise reporting about the status of the project is effective. It has been our experience that principals prefer to communicate in bullet points.

## Develop the Committee

Finding a group to work together to provide different perspectives and talents is the first step towards building a committee. Start by including everyone who would like to be a part of the project, and it is likely that a committee leader and a handful of participants will emerge after a few meetings.

Reach out to people with widely differing talents, not just the obvious landscapers, horticulturalists, and gardeners.



*One of the best parts of starting a garden project is the wonderful opportunity it provides for collaboration with fellow parents.*

Schedule formal meetings—at whatever interval works for the group. Setting them up in advance allows for better attendance. Don't forget to ask the principal and several teachers to be part of the committee. We have seen projects derail when school staff are not included in the planning process. Often, school staff are too busy to attend meetings, but they should be provided with a digest and asked for comments.

### Articulate the Goals of the School Garden

Articulate the goals of your garden as your garden committee develops. Think about what you would like to accomplish and how you will get there. A well-crafted set of goals will also help you communicate effectively to others about the benefits of a school garden.

### Take the Long View

Prepare for at least six months or a year of planning time. During this period, make sure that the teachers are consulted. Spending time clarifying how teachers would like to use their new outdoor classroom will go a long way toward ensuring its long-term sustainability.

### Present Your Plan to the Parent Association

Outline your plans with governing groups like the parent association, site council, or elected governing body who works in concert with the principal.

Cultivate their support and request time at meetings to present the expected outcomes of the garden projects, its proposed budget, and a plan for sustaining it. We have found that a short slide show or PowerPoint presentation is a great tool.

### Secure Start-Up Funding

A small amount of money from the parent association can be the anchor for attracting more money from the outside community, and with parents doing most of the work. A little money can go a long way.

#### To Do List

- Research.
- Develop a Garden Committee.
- Cultivate staff interest.
- Pitch your program ideas to the principal.
- Locate skilled parents, such as grant writers, carpenters, and landscapers.
- Present garden program ideas to the parent association and/or site council.
- Begin an annual fund.

#### Example of a School Garden Overview Benjamin Franklin Elementary School

In order to explore creating an outdoor learning garden for BFES, we have enlisted the support of staff and community members and researched standards-based curriculum that could be applied in the outdoor classroom.

##### Garden Committee Members

Joanne Puloski (1st grade parent)  
Albert Cinceros (1st grade parent)  
Many Jane Jenson (1st grade parent)  
Reggie Jones (4th grade parent; member of PTA)

##### Teachers Who Have Expressed Interest in a Garden Program

Robert McNamee (3rd grade)  
Sarah Collin, Roberta Myles, Jessica Fong (K)  
Amanda Friend (2nd grade)

##### Possible Curriculum to be Used in the Learning Garden

The Growing Classroom, Life Lab  
FOSS Science Kits, K-5

##### Location of Garden Site

The committee is investigating the possibility of putting a garden at the southwestern part of yard #1, or alternatively using the space to the west of the Special Education bungalow as an outdoor classroom. The next step would be to ascertain sunlight and water availability.

##### Maintenance of the Site

Parents and students will construct the garden on a series of weekend workdays. Students will maintain raised beds; parents will organize several weekend workdays to improve and maintain the infrastructure.

##### Funding for the Garden

The committee will request a small starter grant from the parent association, and then will write several grants for small amounts of funding. We will canvass the neighborhood and work with local businesses to build interest and support for our program.