



Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago

Press Release

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Preparing Chicago schoolyards for water makes Space to Grow a *Storm Water Solutions* Top Project



Space to Grow partners were recognized at the Storm Water Solutions Conference & Exhibition recently as a Top Project of 2017 in a national competition. On hand to receive the honor were MWRD Principal Civil Engineer Jim Yurik (from left), Space to Grow Senior Manager Meg Kelly, of the Healthy Schools Campaign, MWRD Associate Civil Engineer John Watson and Assistant Civil Engineer Mark Castillo.

A Chicago partnership to transform local schoolyards into vibrant outdoor community spaces has been nationally recognized for its work addressing stormwater. The public school playground rehabilitation program, Space to Grow, a brainchild of partners at the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago (MWRD), Healthy Schools Campaign, Openlands, the Chicago Department of Water Management and Chicago Public Schools (CPS), was recognized as a Top Project for 2017 by Storm Water Solutions magazine at the Storm Water Solutions annual Conference and Exhibition at the Tinley Park Convention Center.

“On behalf of our Space to Grow partners at the Healthy Schools Campaign, Openlands, the Chicago Department of Water Management and Chicago Public Schools, we are honored to receive this recognition by Storm Water Solutions,” said MWRD President Mariyana Spyropoulos. “Space to Grow provides a vibrant learning environment while at the same time establishes communities with central gathering places. With these new and improved schoolyards, teachers, students and their families are taking ownership of stormwater management, improving local water quality and confronting the excess water that overwhelms our neighborhoods. We have transformed several schools around Chicago and are happy to report that we have more to come.”

Space to Grow converts schoolyards into community spaces for physical activity, outdoor learning, environmental literacy and



(L - R) Wadsworth Elementary School Assistant Principal Leslie Swain-Store, Principal Civil Engineer Jim Yurik, Commissioner Kari K. Steele and Space to Grow Senior Manager Meg Kelly, of the Healthy Schools Campaign, visit the new schoolyard Space to Grow delivered to Wadsworth.

engagement with art, while addressing neighborhood flooding issues. Crumbling asphalt and neglected playground equipment in flood prone neighborhoods are replaced with multi-use “green” schoolyards. Improvements include turf fields, jogging tracks, basketball courts, age-appropriate play equipment, vegetable gardens and rain gardens. The schoolyards are designed to include ground surfaces and landscape features that absorb large amounts of water, which will result in less neighborhood flooding. Since 2014, the partnership has led to nine schoolyard transformations and the design of six more to hold a combined 2.5 million gallons of stormwater. As part of the continuing education, Space to Grow partners have worked with more than 5,000 students in their gardens and trained nearly 300 teachers to effectively incorporate their new schoolyards into their school culture.

“Space to Grow is in full swing and making a positive impact on the schools, students and communities where schoolyards are built,” said Healthy Schools Campaign President & CEO Rochelle Davis. “Our evaluations are showing an increase in physical activity in students of all ages as well as more positive social interactions; positive relationships between the schools and surrounding communities; and staff satisfaction and high utilization of the schoolyard as an extension of their classroom. In addition, we’re also learning that the innovative green stormwater infrastructure is working well to capture millions of gallons of stormwater—keeping it out of the sewers during our heaviest (*continued*)

Preparing Chicago schoolyards for water makes a Top Project, *continued*



A new basketball court is one of the attractions that keep Wadsworth Elementary School students active outside of class thanks to the powerful partnership known as Space to Grow. Stormwater runoff from the court does not directly enter the sewer. Instead, it is captured, detained, and partially infiltrated underneath the accompanying playground and turf field.

storms. That goes a long way to creating more resilient communities. We are excited to continue this momentum to build schoolyards and make green schoolyards the norm in communities across Chicago.”

Highlighted in the Storm Water Solutions honor was one of Space to Grow’s latest creations at Wadsworth Elementary School, 6650 S. Ellis Ave. The new schoolyard comes with an athletic field with artificial turf, a running track, a basketball court, a playground with poured-in-place rubberized surface and vegetable gardens donated by The Kitchen Community. Wadsworth plans to use the new schoolyard to enhance its Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) curriculum, while also exploring many new options for PE class, recess and healthy initiatives for the entire community through outdoor Zumba classes. More than 50 percent of the new surface of the schoolyard is pervious compared to the nearly 100 percent impervious grounds prior to construction. The campus features a cistern capturing roof runoff, a rain garden capturing runoff from the track and 33 trees, 42 shrubs and 1,788 perennials planted by students, parents and community members. More than 130,000 gallons of stormwater is temporarily stored under the surface area before being gradually released to the combined sewer or infiltrated into the subsoil, thus not only mitigating flooding but helping the MWRD improve water quality.

“Space to Grow is forging partnerships and innovation at all levels. Not only are three public agencies on board as capital partners and providing funding, leadership and expertise for the schoolyard design and renovation - the program engages prin-



Space to Grow converts schoolyards into vibrant community spaces like this one at Wadsworth Elementary School in the Englewood neighborhood. In the process, these campus upgrades address flooding issues.

cipals, teachers, students, parents, neighbors and community organizations,” said Openlands President & CEO Jerry Adelman. “Schoolyard design includes innovative engineering that STEM schools can incorporate into their curriculum; they are spaces for parents and students to engage with nature and be active; and the program’s design is a model for other cities across the country.” Space to Grow officials and MWRD Commissioner Kari K. Steele celebrated the recognition with Wadsworth students and Principal Rashid Shabazz on a recent visit to the school. “We are excited to see these improved outdoor spaces being used for recreation and education, while also helping us meet our goals of protecting businesses and homes from flood damage and protecting the quality of water,” said MWRD Commissioner Steele. “Thank you to our Space to Grow partners for continuing this essential lesson in stormwater management. It’s because of these partners that we are able to expand our mission to various school communities throughout Chicago.”

This is the second straight year an MWRD affiliated project has been honored by Storm Water Solutions as a Top Project. In 2016, the MWRD was recognized along with the city of Blue Island and design engineers Environmental Design International for a green infrastructure project in the south suburban community. For the project, the MWRD installed six rain gardens and two permeable parking lots in flood prone areas to capture more than 150,000 gallons of stormwater per rain event and assist in mitigating flooding damages.

To read about Space to Grow in an upcoming edition of Storm Water Solutions and see other top projects, visit www.estormwater.com.

Recovering Resources, Transforming Water

Established in 1889, the MWRD (www.mwr.org) is an award winning, special purpose government agency responsible for used water treatment and stormwater management in Cook County, Illinois.