

## Tucson, Arizona

Population	520,116
Development pattern	Low-density city
Population density	2,500 per square mile
Median household income	\$30,981
Partners involved	City of Tucson Tucson Unified School District Tucson Police Department

Tucson has a park deficit. The city averages 6.2 acres of park per 1,000 residents – about half the national average. And Tucson ranks last in the nation for available parkland among cities with low population density. At the same time, Tucson’s population is rapidly increasing.

School board member Bruce Burke recalls community members advocating for access to their local high school tennis court so they could practice on weekends. Concerned about liability and maintenance issues, school officials told the group – and many others – they would have to find other places to play.

Nevertheless, the school’s fields and playgrounds were heavily used at nights, on weekends, and during the summer. Roger Pfeuffer, a retired superintendent of the city’s largest school district, publicly described helping his grandchildren hop their school’s playground fence.

In 2007, Rodney Glassman ran for Tucson City Council, making schoolyard access a central campaign issue. After his election, his staff identified neighborhood schools as “low-hanging fruit” – a way to quickly increase play space with little up-front cost.

“We have over 100 elementary, middle, and high school campuses with grass fields, but they’re surrounded by chain link fences and closed after 3 p.m. and on weekends, and all summer long,” says Councilman Glassman. “My goal was to leverage the community resources that already existed and provide the opportunity for neighbors to enjoy them.”

Councilman Glassman suggested joint use agreements between the city and Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) – the largest of the city’s 14 school districts – to open these spaces to the community after school hours.

Tucson set a goal to have a park or play space within a half-mile of every resident. The city also conducted a play space audit to identify available play spaces and determine areas in need of development.

The city’s parks department had a long track record of forming joint use agreements with the school districts for specific construction projects. But elected officials were promoting a new type of agreement that would open up play spaces for after-school and summer use.



Under the plan, TUSD would be responsible for maintenance and upgrade costs at all school playgrounds and fields throughout the school year. The city would take over maintenance and equipment costs during summer months. In exchange, the schools would open gates or take down fences and make these spaces available to the public after school hours and on weekends.

The up-front expenses were minimal – typically just minor repairs or resurfacing. Adding the sites to the city’s summer maintenance responsibilities would cost about \$4,000 a year per schoolyard.

There were some initial safety and liability concerns. Some parents and school administrators were worried that removing barriers to playgrounds would increase loitering, graffiti, vandalism, underage drinking on school grounds, and incidents of people not picking up after their dogs in areas used by children. The Tucson Police Department agreed to do regular patrols at each schoolyard covered by a joint use agreement, and its role was written into the agreement. This arrangement encouraged community buy-in.

The city attorney helped the parties form an intergovernmental agreement in the form of a memorandum of understanding (MOU), and the city and TUSD started identifying schools to include. Because of budget limitations, the agreement was limited to 12 school sites: two TUSD elementary schools in each of the city’s six wards. The parks department and TUSD selected schools that were furthest from other parks and playgrounds.

The agreements are working out well. “The play equipment and fields get a lot of use after school hours,” says Gary Scott, a manager in the city’s parks and recreation department. “One feature of our joint use agreement that truly benefits the community is that we built sustainability into it by establishing a term of 25 years, so the current arrangement will be in place for at least that long.”

They’ve also seen a reduction in vandalism, which school officials and city staff attribute to higher usage rates. “When the playgrounds were locked up and infrequently used, kids were sneaking in, and that’s when they would do the damage,” says Annemarie Medina, the mayor’s constituent advocate. “Now, knowing anyone can walk in at any time, they must be afraid of getting caught if they are doing something wrong, so they don’t do it. That was a nice by-product of the joint use agreements.”

By leveraging existing play opportunities, Tucson expanded play opportunities at relatively little cost. Each of the city’s six wards now has two additional playgrounds, located specifically in communities with the largest deficit of play space. “We’re recapturing our neighborhoods for our kids,” Glassman says. “It sends the right message.”