Cities Connecting Children to Nature

Discussion Paper: Current State and Prospects for
Advancing & Sustaining Systems Change for Children's Equitable Access to
Nature March 4, 2020

The Cities Connecting Children to Nature initiative (CCCN) tests the hypothesis that equitable nature connections for children will advance further and faster through the engagement of city government leaders, producing a range of benefits for children, families, communities -- and perhaps, the planet. Since its launch in 2014 by the National League of Cities Institute for Youth, Education, and Families and the Children & Nature Network, CCCN has directly engaged with leaders from more than 40 cities through leadership academies, technical assistance, and development and implementation of city-specific plans. The process to date has produced new and realigned capacity in cities, as well as many lessons learned and examples embodied in a *Municipal Action Guide* (2017) and in briefs, videos, recorded webinars, and newsletters. The *Guide* named three critical questions to spur reflective action by cities and their leaders:

> *1. Does my city offer enough places for children to connect with nature?*
> *2. What programs and policies can draw children and families to nature more equitably?*
> *3. How can my city integrate access to nature with other city functions?*

Now, proceeding into its sixth year, the initiative has increased its focus on systems-level change and adopted a systems change framework recently elaborated by FSG. This framework for "shifting the conditions that hold a problem in place" -- in this case, the problem of inequitable access to nature -- addresses six domains of system change:

> *Structural change - explicit:* **Policies, Practices, Resources**
> *Structural change - semi-explicit:* **Relationships & Connections, Power Dynamics**
> *Transformative change - implicit:* **Attitudes and beliefs** – *constraining ways of thinking.*

This brief paper describes representative examples of structural change observed from 2015 to the present. Questions still remain about additional aspects of systems change including:

- The relationship of local CCCN initiatives to emerging state policy, and also to broad local policy initiatives focused on improving health, resilience, and sustainability;
- The feasibility of shifting power dynamics to ensure ongoing youth and resident engagement, particularly on the part of youth and residents who have the least nature access; and
- The extent to which city policies embrace multiple ways of understanding connections to nature, and fading away of previous ingrained and constrained ways of thinking.

EXAMPLES of STRUCTURAL CHANGE for MORE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO NATURE
Policies

- **Joint/Shared Use:** Austin and Grand Rapids updated and expanded local city-school Joint Use Agreements to enable equity-driven implementation of green schoolyards.

- **Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights:** Mayors publicly proclaimed a rights-based framework in Austin, Baltimore, and San Francisco.

NLC NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES   children & nature NETWORK

- **Master Plans & Park Access:** Madison incorporated nature access in the city's Comprehensive Plan; Grand Rapids adopted a Parks Master Plan with a focus on equitable nature access. Cities aligned the goals of children and nature and *Ten-Minute Walk to a Park* efforts.

- **Quality Assurance:** San Francisco, Austin, and Madison increased the focus on nature access within state and local early childhood quality improvement rating systems.

Practices

- **Infusing nature into programming:** Louisville trained summer youth employees to lead nature access activities for children participating in community center summer camps.

- **Nature-Smart Libraries:** Saint Paul spread the availability of materials and programming focusing on nature connections for children from one to four libraries.

- **Park Activation:** Albuquerque launched a citywide Family Nature Club strategy; Gary arranged transportation to Indiana Dunes National Park for afterschool programs.

Resource Flows

- **Budgeting for Staffing:** Louisville, Austin, and San Francisco hired full-time staff members to coordinate local CCCN activities; Baltimore, Saint Paul, and Austin hired part-time staff; Providence and Houston each enlisted a VISTA volunteer to support local efforts.

- **Capital & Operating Budgets:** Providence earmarked $2.5 million in capital improvement funds for Green Schoolyard construction; Grand Rapids allocated $703,000 for Green Schoolyards; Providence and Madison installed nature play features in city parks.

- **Leveraged Philanthropic Support:** Grand Rapids received a $300,000 environmental education grant from the Wege Foundation and $410,000 through the Outdoor Foundation Thrive Outside initiative. Louisville applied Aetna Foundation support to CCCN activities.

Relationships and Connections

- **Cross-Department Partnerships:** Saint Paul, San Antonio, and San Francisco established library-park partnerships; Washington, DC convened a Green Career Pathways roundtable.

- **Cross-Jurisdictional Partnerships:** Alongside city-school examples cited above, the Saint Louis Mayor's Office of Children, Youth, and Families created a joint stakeholder group with the Saint Louis Public Schools focused on green schoolyard development.

Power Dynamics

- **Mayoral Leadership:** Mayors in eight of 18 cities receiving technical assistance took on significant leadership roles, including advocating budget changes, designating staff to coordinate local efforts and convening key stakeholders.

- **Youth / Resident Engagement:** Madison, Austin, Saint Paul, and Grand Rapids engaged youth and young adults in the development of local CCCN plans and priorities; Louisville established an ongoing stakeholder engagement council in West Louisville.