



Focus on: Safe Parks and Edible Playgrounds

Background

Obesity is one of the many factors negatively influencing life expectancy. Almost every state in North America has seen a rise in the number of persons who are overweight or significantly out of proportion with respect to body-to-mass index (BMI).

State Obesity Rates Among U.S. Adults

Number of States

Obesity Rate	1998	2007
10-14%	10	0
15-19%	33	1
20-24%	7	19
25-29%	0	27
>30%	0	3
New York State	15-19%	25-29%

Because these conditions parallel a concomitant rise in the rates of type 2 diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, etc., it is imperative to chart a new course of action to stem the rising tide. Furthermore, obesity among children has also risen at an alarming rate and according to the CDC, for the first time in ages, the next generations of our offspring may experience shorter life spans than their immediate ancestors.

We are humbled that the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), the largest private philanthropic research organization in the United States focused on health issues has invited us to partner with them in an effort to combat the obesity epidemic. During their most recent round of funding for faith-based institutions, 4.8 million dollars were awarded to 20 different groups to fund 22 different programs advocating for changes in policies and the environment with respect to childhood obesity. Out of nearly 100 applicants across the United States and its territories, SICM is proud to be a recipient of a two-year, \$222,000 grant focused on creating **“Safe Parks and Edible Playgrounds.”** The essence of the project is twofold: 1) assembling of a coalition of partners, both private and public groups, focused on creating sustainable policies for increased use of public parks while promoting the cultivation of safe places for children to play outdoors and 2) designing or adopting a curriculum for growing fruits and vegetables by and for elementary to middle school children. To date, we have assembled a coalition of over 27 partners, including neighborhood residents, local school students and officials, city government, and other social agencies. We also want to provide opportunities to learn more about nutrition while developing a healthy respect for taking care of the environment.

Edible Playgrounds

With respect to Schenectady County, the concept of Edible Playgrounds was pioneered by Roots and Wisdom; a youth agriculture and community service program that brings together urban, suburban, and rural Schenectady County residents to grow organic vegetables for donation to local food pantries and for sale within the county. Roots & Wisdom is a self-funded project of Cornell Cooperative Extension.



Edible Playgrounds focus on gardening *for children and by children*. From toddlers to teens, programs have been designed to stimulate outdoor activity while teaching the fundamentals of agriculture and nutrition. Over the past few years, several Edible Playgrounds have been planted in at least three city parks as well as vacant land in a local cemetery! Diverse fruits and vegetables were grown including potatoes, tomatoes, beans, peppers, squash, cucumbers, cabbage, and collard greens, to name a few. During the summer months, Roots, Shoots, Flowers, and Fruits, a two- to four-week curriculum, forms the basis of the programming for middle school aged children. Older teens assist in training the younger students. Wee One Wednesdays focuses on children 3 – 5 years old.

The original garden created by Roots and Wisdom on Fehr Avenue (Central Park) continued to flourish. A second garden was planted at Hillhurst Park after meeting with the Bellevue Preservation Association to solicit support. The idea was met with great enthusiasm with some of the neighborhood residents who then gave their services for surveillance and garden maintenance. We initiated the third Playground in Orchard Park with volunteers from GE and the Union Graduate College (President and staff) and after meetings with both the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood Association and the local parish. The three playgrounds involved 290 youth from five different schools.



Unfortunately, the garden at Orchard Park was located in an area that had poor surveillance and the park itself was not easily located. Therefore, although the yield of fruits and vegetables was acceptable, the number of kids who participated in the summer curriculum was not very large. Since SICM does not operate a summer lunch program in Orchard Park, we decided to move to other locations in the summer of 2010. We also had some problems with vandalism in that our tool shed was broken into and damaged before the summer ended.



A very promising idea was offered by the pastor and some of the members of the Mt. Carmel Roman Catholic Church in Mont Pleasant. There are many Italian grandmothers and grandfathers who meet at the church regularly. Many of them have back yard gardens where they raise vegetables and herbs for many of their meals. It would be helpful if we could get some of these residents to mentor some of the children in the edible playgrounds.

The Safe Parks Coalition



Initially meeting in early 2009, the Safe Parks Coalition (SPC) has examined policies and practices from around the country. The group's main objective is to re-establish physical activity and safe access to playgrounds while providing access to nutritious food and education.

The SPC meets monthly. The initial presenter was the NYS Police Commissioner who helped the SPC to determine future strategies. The idea of safe places for families to play was being held back by a perception of local crime. The initial proposal to RWJF was to advocate for "drug free zones." However, upon researching the effectiveness of such entities in other municipalities, the SPC determined it to be at best a marginal utility and at times a detriment. According to the District Attorney, the current parks are already "de facto" such zones. A pending NYS law to expand the zones to parks continues in deliberations. The SPC discovered that elsewhere such zones can be occasions to arrest more persons of color with little or no effect on crime levels. A national program, Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) shows that proper layout of park equipment is a better methodology to reduce criminal activity when coupled with the use of cameras for surveillance

Building upon models already partially established in several SICM lunch locations, a matrix delineating proper facilities is being used as the main model. Using a simple 'yes' and 'no' criteria, targets for funding and programming have been identified.

Safe Parks Matrix for Success in Alleviating Childhood Obesity

- *Summer lunch program*
- *Pavilion*
- *Bathrooms or Port-a-Potty Pad*
- *Nutritional education program*
- *Physical activity program*
- *Video Camera Surveillance*



Project SKIP



Origin of Project SKIP

In December of 2007, a number of Union College students went to help in rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. While there, one of the projects they worked on was a community built playground. Struck by how it brought the community together, they thought, "Why not Schenectady?"

The Goal of Project S.K.I.P

The goal of Project S.K.I.P (**Schenectady Kids Imagine and Play**) is to renovate Jerry Burrell Park in the Hamilton Hill neighborhood of Schenectady and to build a new playground for underserved children. A small group of Union alumni and current students have partnered with **Weed and Seed, the Schenectady Inner City Ministry (SICM), the City and County of Schenectady, Union College, and others** to make the renovation and playground possible. To date, over \$80,000 has been raised and we are eagerly anticipating building the playground in literally one day (May 22, 2010)!



SICM Summer Lunch at Jerry Burrell Park

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The Schenectady Safe Parks Coalition Membership (2009-10)

<i>The Boys and Girls Club of Schenectady</i>	<i>Schenectady County Public Health Services</i>	<i>The Schenectady Foundation</i>
<i>Weed and Seed Project</i>	<i>Schenectady County Chamber of Commerce</i>	<i>Local Clergy</i>
<i>Roots and Wisdom</i>	<i>New York State Police</i>	<i>Union College Students Project SKIP</i>
<i>City of Schenectady Dept. of Neighborhood Revitalization</i>	<i>City of Schenectady Police Department</i>	<i>NYS Dept. of Health: Healthy Heart Program</i>
<i>Schenectady YWCA</i>	<i>Hamilton Hills Art Center</i>	<i>Vale Cemetery and Park Coalition</i>
<i>Schenectady YMCA</i>	<i>Schenectady City Council</i>	<i>Girls, Inc.</i>
<i>County of Schenectady</i>	<i>League of Women Voters of Schenectady</i>	<i>MVP Health Care</i>
<i>Schenectady County Youth Services</i>	<i>Community Foundation of the Capital Region</i>	<i>GE Elfuns/GE Volunteers</i>
<i>Schenectady County District Attorney's Office</i>	<i>The Golub Corporation</i>	<i>The Carlilion Foundation</i>
		<i>The Center for Community Justice</i>

