

ENVIRONMENT



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Back in 1983, one sentence in a long report about the lack of parks in Houston struck city councilmember Eleanor Tinsley. It suggested turning school grounds into public parks. Tinsley's previous tenure on the Houston ISD board perfectly positioned her to try the novel idea, and within months four public parks were under construction on school grounds. Today more than 200 **SPARK** parks enhance community life in 11 school districts throughout the greater Houston area.

Schools in underserved neighborhoods get priority. "Some neighborhoods are primarily apartment complexes, where children hardly ever see flowers and trees or have a safe, fun place to play outdoors," says executive director Kathleen Ownby. "Our parks generally contain modular play equipment, benches and picnic tables, jogging trails and outdoor classroom areas or stages. We only require that the parks stay open after school and during the weekends so everyone has access."

Once a principal applies and a school is accepted for a park, SPARK—short for "school park"—involves everyone. Schools are asked to raise \$5,000 toward the \$75,000 to \$100,000 cost through penny drives, bake sales, spaghetti dinners and other events. Parents, teachers, other school staff and civic club members work on a committee to plan the park. Students, with guidance from the school's art teacher or a local artist, design and install prominent pieces of public art. Because everyone in the community feels ownership and responsibility, they go on to take care of their prized park.

School districts operate the parks, but SPARK returns after ten years to "ReSpark" older installations. Ownby says, "Play equipment evolves over the years and parks need updating." With city, county and federal government support and private donations, SPARK builds about 10 new parks a year, and there is a waiting list for more. Before Tinsley passed away in 2009, she saw her unique plan flourish. Ownby—Tinsley's daughter—says with a touch of pride and feeling, "SPARK has clearly improved the quality of life in Houston by creating hundreds of parks for the city's people to enjoy and cherish."



Garden Oaks Elementary SPARK Park



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