

SPARK PARKS INCREASE PARK ACCESS IN HOUSTON

Houston Endowment and Kinder Foundation lead support to expand park equity

HOUSTON, TX (January 13, 2021) — Supported by lead grants from Houston Endowment and Kinder Foundation, SPARK, the Houston-based nonprofit organization that transforms public school playgrounds into community parks for out-of-school time use, has successfully introduced 25 new parks and updated, or ‘re-SPARKed’, five at campuses across 12 independent school districts and three charter schools since 2016. Data indicates that over 82,000 Harris County residents thereby gained ten-minute walk access to these new parks. Invigorated by the program’s success, Houston Endowment and Kinder Foundation have committed to support Phase II of SPARK’s efforts to mitigate ‘park deserts’ throughout Greater Houston. This follow-up investment enables SPARK to create 15 new parks and re-SPARK 15 more over the next four years.

The need for more parks and park acreage was reinforced in a 2018 report by the [Trust for Public Land](#) (TPL) that ranked Houston 77th of 100 large U.S. cities in greenspace access, noting that less than half of the city’s 2.3 million residents lived within 10-minutes of a park. The SPARK collaboration between Houston Endowment, Kinder Foundation and others seeks to contribute to the City of Houston’s goal of boosting that number to 75% by 2040, impacting more than half a million lives in the area.

“Houston Endowment’s mission is to work with others toward a vibrant, engaged and equitable community. SPARK builds strong partnerships to transform school parks, which strengthens communities and significantly expands access to parks across the region. And the data shows that when these spaces are made available, people use them and benefit from them,” said Houston Endowment President and CEO Ann Stern.

“The Kinder Foundation finds SPARK to be a thoughtful and effective park developer, and we applaud SPARK for focusing on neighborhoods that need parks,” states Nancy Kinder, President and CEO. “What people may not realize is that the School District and the local community also contribute to the creation of each park. This results in a deeper local connection. We are pleased to help bring more SPARK parks to neighborhoods.”

SPARK was able to leverage donations from the City of Houston; Harris and Fort Bend Counties; participating school districts; private donors; local management and utility districts; area foundations and corporations; and in-kind partners to secure over \$2 million toward the project. An early significant gift from the Powell Foundation helped build momentum among other foundations.

“In 2016, Houston Endowment came to us with a lofty goal that we were absolutely determined to achieve: to create 25 new SPARK parks in park desert communities over three to four years,” said SPARK Board President Mark Lee. “Their initial grant support and strategic thinking along with support from Kinder Foundation was critical, as it enabled SPARK to adjust our school engagement model, build organizational capacity and seek matching funds from a variety of public and private sources. As a result, we not only achieved our shared goal, but are also better equipped as an organization to increase park equity moving forward.”

The neighborhood around Horn Elementary in Alief Independent School District is an example of a former ‘park desert’. The principal formed an on-campus SPARK Park Committee in 2018. The surrounding community includes 3,000 residents in a 10-minute walk radius. Included in that radius are more than 700 low-income households that would be especially hard-pressed to access other greenspace options. Each school participating in the SPARK program is given a goal of raising \$5,000, so the school committee initiated a fundraising campaign to realize their vision of creating a welcoming, shared space. Through student fundraising and a community-wide effort, Horn Elementary was able to raise over \$7,500 through a coin drive, popcorn sales, sponsored mural project, and donations from a few neighborhood businesses. Alief Independent School District contributed an additional \$9,000 to the project and Harris County Precinct 1 contributed \$10,000. SPARK sponsored the rest of the \$300,000 park that provided new playground equipment, a mosaic mural, a covered outdoor classroom with several picnic tables, a scenic walking trail, as well as nearby soccer fields.

“Horn Elementary’s collaboration with the SPARK School Park Program was a wonderful journey and a huge success,” said Mary Starling, Principal of Horn Elementary. “It is both a beautiful park as well as a testament to a successful, concerted effort on the part of the community that enjoys it.”

The SPARK School Park Program was founded in 1983 by Council Member Eleanor Tinsley, recognizing that creating neighborhood parks on school grounds is an efficient and cost-effective way to increase greenspace acreage. SPARK parks are planned and designed through a process that includes parents, school staff and community members, as well as local architects and designers. Although each park is unique, a typical SPARK park consists of modular playground equipment, a walking trail, benches, picnic tables, trees, an outdoor classroom and a public art component. The latter is typically designed and installed by students with guidance from the school’s art teacher or local artists.

Since 1983, SPARK has built more than 200 parks in Harris, Fort Bend and Waller counties. Even so, within Houston’s 671 square miles remain many “park deserts” — broad areas without greenspace — often in less privileged neighborhoods. This is why Houston Endowment, Kinder Foundation and other foundation partners remain committed to build on the progress to date.

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About Houston Endowment

Established in 1937, Houston Endowment advances equity of opportunity for the people of Greater Houston and enhances the vibrancy of our community so that our region and its people thrive. Since inception, the Endowment has granted more than \$2 billion to the area in support of our community and advancing our mission and has awarded \$80 million in 2020. Visit houstonendowment.org.

About SPARK

SPARK has more than 150 active community parks in 17 different school districts throughout the Houston area plus three charter schools. Visit sparkpark.org.

About Kinder Foundation

The Kinder Foundation, a family foundation established in 1997 by Rich and Nancy Kinder, has

distributed nearly \$444 million in gifts to transformational projects in the areas of urban green space, education, and quality of life. Visit kinderfoundation.org.