Mejorando Nuestras Oportunidades para Recreación y Actividad Física: Engaging Youth in Research and Local Policy Advocacy

Improving our Opportunities for Recreation and Physical Activity: Engaging Youth in Research and Local Policy Advocacy

Report on Lawrence’s Parks
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This project is a collaboration between Groundwork Lawrence, the Lawrence Community Development Department, and Tufts University to conduct a youth-engaged research study of the quality/condition and utilization of parks and playgrounds in the city of Lawrence. This study aims to inform local efforts to improve parks and playgrounds and increase their usage in order to increase physical activity, decrease sedentary behaviors, and ultimately decrease obesity rates in the city, particularly among children and youth. By informing efforts to improve the quality and condition of parks and playgrounds in Lawrence, this project aims to provide a healthier environment to combat health disparities, particularly in the area of obesity. The study takes a community development and empowerment approach to public health improvement focused on youth civic participation.

The project provides an opportunity for young people to become more involved in their community through participation in collaborative research and advocacy efforts, and gives them a leadership role in improving their living environment. Five youth (ages 16-20) from the Lawrence community conducted assessments of the city’s parks and playgrounds between May and October 2010. They collected data on who is using the parks, when, what kinds of activities they engage in, and the features and conditions of the parks. The youth have been writing and publishing a monthly newsletter on the project for the Lawrence community, Caring for our Community: Getting to know our parks, and have an article published in Rumbo, a free local newspaper, called Park of the Week. Both are published bilingually in English and Spanish.
The research team for this project was comprised of five youth from Lawrence (more below), Rose Gonzalez from Groundwork Lawrence, and Flavia Peréa and Linda Martinez from Tufts University. Pictured from left to right: Linda, Daniel, Juana, Katherine, Rumaira, Tanya, Flavia and Rose.

My name is Katherine Almonte and I am 17 years old. I’m Dominican and have been a resident of Lawrence for four years. Right now I’m applying to college so I can fulfill one of my dreams. I was part of this project because I thought it would be a great opportunity for me. I also wanted to help my community and feel good about myself for something I’d done. I’m proud of my community because it is mostly Hispanic and it feels like home. This project is valuable to the community because after it’s finished we hope that changes are made based on our recommendations. I hope that people feel proud of us as young residents of Lawrence and of the work we’ve done. I learned a lot of valuable skills that will help me a lot in the future. The most important thing for me was the experience with public speaking at the Boston Museum of Science. I was nervous, but now I feel more confident of my public speaking skills.

My name is Tanya Borrero and I am 19 years old. I come from a Hispanic family and have lived in Lawrence all my life and am proud to say that Lawrence is my community. Currently I am a freshman at Northern Essex Community College in Lawrence studying education to become a teacher of young children with disabilities. Knowing the good resources this project brings to my community is what makes me proud to have done this work. Different people may have different impressions of my community but taking a closer look you will find great resources that are always available to everyone. For example the parks in Lawrence offer opportunities to spend time outdoors and to exercise. With the high obesity rate in Lawrence, informing people of the great resource we have in our parks was something I really enjoyed while working on the project. Doing something productive for Lawrence makes me feel good about myself and gives me hope for our community. There are parks all around our community and in our neighborhoods that give us the ability to live healthier lives.
My name is **Rumaira Balborda** and I am 19 years old. I will be attending college in the fall of 2011. The reason why I was part of this project was because I wanted to give back to my community. I also wanted to show my city that there are people who care about Lawrence. I also took part in this project because I love to write and do research. I want to become a journalist and be a news reporter one day. So I thought this project would benefit me and help me in the future and it has. This project motivated me to do more in my city. I am proud of my community because there is a big population of Latinos who work hard to get somewhere in life. Everyone comes here for a better life and future. This project is valuable to my community because it shows the community that there are people who care, especially the youth. I have learned a lot from this project especially how to work in a team. I learned more about the parks in my city, many that I didn’t even know existed. This project improved my research skills and my ability to speak in front of an audience. I am very happy that I was part of this project.

My name is **Juana Matias**. I am 18 years old and I have lived in Lawrence for 12 years now. I am currently attending Merrimack College. I am proud to say that I have done something successful for my community but also for myself. I feel like I have accomplished something good for myself because I know that I am capable of doing good things and setting a good example for future generations. Giving back to my community by doing projects such as this one can make this community better. I can now say that my community has great parks and people will use them for good purposes. This project is valuable for the community because people have the opportunity to become more united by doing something for their community. Being a part of this program gave me the opportunity to learn skills that will be useful in my future career. I have become more confident in myself after speaking in public, learned research skills and how to work in a team, and become more open to learning new things. I can say that I am much more knowledgeable after participating in this project.

My name is **Daniel Lopez-Martinez** and I’m currently a sophomore at Northern Essex Community College. I’m glad I’m working with this project because I want to give back to the city that I grew up in. I want to make a difference in this city and hopefully my team’s voices are heard so the city can do something about the parks. Not only is the city responsible, but the community, the people who live in Lawrence, should also make a difference and value their parks. I just want to see more families going to parks and enjoying themselves as families.
Youth researchers provided an overall grade for each of their parks based on the following five criteria:

- Recreation Factor (Example: fun, relaxing things you can do there)
- Cleanliness
- Safety
- Amenities (Example: bathrooms, water fountains) if applicable
- Condition of existing features (Example: playground equipment, benches, tables)
- Overall Score (Average)

The parks were rated on each of the five criteria with a star rating from one to five:

- A (Excellent! Needs no improvement)
- B (Very good, Needs some improvement)
- C (Good, Needs a lot of improvement)
- D (Fair. Barely acceptable)
- F (Poor, Not acceptable)
Bourgoin Square by Rumaira

Located on West Street, between Wendell Street and Acton Street

Park features
This park offers baseball fields and a playground.

Age group this park would be good for
The age group for this park is mostly adults because I see many that go there and play soccer. Sometimes I see children at the playground.

Best things about this park
The best thing about this park is that the location is convenient for everyone. In the summer many people enjoy this park.

Room for Improvement
This park needs a lot of improvements. They need to plant more grass, cut the tall grass and fix the playground.

Park Score Card
Recreation Factor
Cleanliness
Safety
Condition of existing features
Overall Score
Campagnone (North) Common by Rumaira

Located at Haverhill Street and Lawrence Street

Park features
This park has a playground, a stage and a small baseball field. A lot of people come to this park to just relax.

Age group this park would be good for
This park is always filled with adults. Sometimes there are kids at the playground.

Best things about this park
One of the best things about this park is that you always find people there. They even sell juices and food at this park.

Room for Improvement
This park would be better if people didn't litter so much.

Park Score Card

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Costello Park by Rumaira

Located on the Shawsheen River at the intersection of Crawford and Abbott Streets

Park features
This park has many things including a basketball court, a handball court, and swings with a playground.

Age group this park would be good for
I recommend this park mostly to teens and young adults.

Best things about this park
The best thing about this park is that it's big and it has a long walking path where you can run or jog.

Room for Improvement
If this park didn't have so much graffiti it would be a much nicer park.
Cronin Park by Katherine

Located at 86 Loring Street

Park features
This park offers swings in great condition, a really good jungle gym, great benches with tables and a really good view.

Age group this park would be good for
This park would be good for kids, teenagers and adults.

Best things about this park
This park has a great jungle gym, love the red color. Love the benches and the swings. This park also has a great location.

Room for Improvement
The things that need improvement are the grass and trash containers.

Park Score Card

Recreation Factor

Cleanliness

Safety

Condition of existing features

Overall Score
**Donovan Park** by Tanya

Located at Andover Street between Beacon and Amherst Streets

**Park features**
This park is in a fenced-in area with a jungle gym for younger kids, a sandbox, two pieces of playground equipment, and a table with benches.

**Age group this park would be good for**
Children under six or seven years old would be good for this park.

**Best things about this park**
The fenced-in area is good for safety and the jungle gym are the best things about this park.

**Room for Improvement**
This park needs improvement overall. The quality of the equipment is very poor, and cleanliness and safety need to be improved.

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**Park Score Card**

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Dr. Nina Scarito Park by Juana

Located on Brook Street along the Spicket River

**Park features**
This beautiful park offers playground equipment for small children, such as slides and a beautiful garden. The park has a nice basketball court and plenty of grassy space to sit and relax and enjoy a nice summer day eating ice cream.

**Age group this park would be good for**
The appropriate age groups for this park are families and teens. Small children ride bikes and play in the playground while their parents relax and watch them.

**Best things about this park**
The best thing about this park is how it has a canopy area where a family can celebrate with a picnic or birthday party. Also the park has beautiful scenery.

**Room for Improvement**
The only thing this park needs is a little TLC for the basketball court (needs new nets and benches) and the garden needs cleaning (maintenance) and water for the plants.

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### Park Score Card

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<th>Recreation Factor</th>
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Gagnon Park by Juana

Located on Providence Street, between Shawmut Street and Community Ave across from Bruce School

Park features
This park features a playground for small kids, jungle gym, monkey bars, climbing equipment, a slide, benches and chairs, a baseball field, nice views and a quiet area.

Age group this park would be good for
Small children and teens with supervision of an adult would enjoy this lovely park.

Best things about this park
The playground is a great area for small children and the baseball field is great for afterschool activity.

Room for Improvement
The things in this park that need improvement are the removal of graffiti and the plastic that covers the floor in the playground area for small kids.

Park Score Card
Recreation Factor

Cleanliness

Safety

Condition of existing features

Overall Score
Hayden Schofield Playstead by Tanya

Located at the intersection of Lawrence and Myrtle Streets

Park features
The park has a huge baseball field with benches attached for the spectators. There are also wastebaskets and benches close to the fenced-in swing sets and large walking areas.

Age group this park would be good for
This park is good for children of all ages. They can play baseball in the baseball fields and they have swing sets for toddlers and older children. Seniors enjoy this park as well.

Best things about this park
The best thing about Hayden Schofield is its large field.

Room for Improvement
The safety in this park needs to be improved because there are no fences. The quality of the park needs to be improved, some swings are broken. The litter in the park should be improved to make the parks cleaner.

Park Score Card
Recreation Factor

Cleanliness

Safety

Condition of existing features

Overall Score
Howard Playstead by Katherine

Located Across from the intersection of Lawrence and Hampshire Streets

Park features
This park offers a really good baseball field, a tennis court, a jungle gym, swings, great light, a basketball court, terrible benches and a kind of good view.

Age group this park would be good for
This park would be good for teenagers and adults.

Best things about this park
The baseball fields and basketball court are in good condition. There is a lot of grass in the park.

Room for Improvement
The things that need improvement in this park are the jungle gym, tennis court, benches, swings and part of the basketball court.

Park Score Card
Recreation Factor

Cleanliness

Safety

Condition of existing features

Overall Score
Kennedy Park by Katherine

Located at 9 Holly Street

Park features
It has a baseball field, great benches with tables, a good jungle gym, lights, swings, and trash containers.

Age group this park would be good for
This park would be good for seniors to sit and relax, kids and teenagers.

Best things about this park
The benches are in great condition. The jungle gym is really good.

Room for improvement
The things about this park that need improvement are the grass, the one tree that was almost falling over, the baseball field and the trash containers.

Park Score Card

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Lindquist Playstead by Tanya

Located at the intersection of Emmett Street and Burke

Park features
This park features a baseball field in its own closed-in section with benches, a playground, tables and chairs. It's behind a public school, but it's also open to the public. It has a nice parking area and is located in a nice quite area.

Age group this park would be good for
Teenagers who enjoy playing baseball would enjoy this park. Children under 12 years old would also be good for this park.

Best things about this park
The baseball field and the fenced-in playground are the best things about this park.

Room for Improvement
The graffiti in this park needs to be removed and the park equipment, like the benches, needs improvement.

Park Score Card
Recreation Factor
Cleanliness
Safety
Condition of existing features
Overall Score
Manchester Park by Katherine

Located at 77 Manchester St, behind the Frutería, borders Stevens Pond at the beginning of the Spicket River

Park features
The park offers a really great jungle gym, nice swings that are in good condition, colorful benches in good condition, and a nice variety of plants. The park is well-lit and provides a great opportunity for kids to play in a colorful place.

Age group this park would be good for
The park would be good for younger children and teenagers

Best things about this park
The great condition of the park is one of its best qualities. The swings are in great condition. The jungle gym is colorful and new.

Room for Improvement
The only thing that I think needs improvement is that the park only has a little bit of grass. I think it needs more grass.
McDermott Park by Juana

Located on Bailey Street, near intersection of Bailey and Parker Streets

Park features
This park features a playground for small kids, swings, tables, sprinklers and nice views.

Age group this park would be good for
This park would be good for small children and kids ages eight to fifteen years old.

Best things about this park
The best thing about this park is the playground for small children.

Room for Improvement
The grass needs to be cut. The park also needs new playground equipment, new tables and new benches.

Park Score Card

Recreation Factor

Cleanliness

Safety

Condition of existing features

Overall Score
Mount Vernon Park by Tanya

Located at the intersection of Amherst and Mount Vernon Streets

Park features
Mount Vernon Park features many things like two-three full-size baseball fields, benches, basketball courts, nice walking trails, facilities for both men and women, drinking fountains, tables, a concession stand and an area for children with swings, slide, jungle gym and other playground equipment.

Age group this park would be good for
Toddlers and kids ages 7 to 14 would be good for this park as well as teenagers, or older adults and senior citizens would be able to enjoy this park.

Best things about this park
The best two things about this park are the men’s and women’s restrooms (which most parks don't have) as well as the concession stand. They both come into great use.

Room for Improvement
The drinking fountain in the park needs improvement because it doesn't work. Graffiti in the park needs to be removed. There should be no graffiti in the park.

Park Score Card

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O’Connell South Common by Rumaira

Located at the intersection of South Union and Market Streets

Park features
This park offers a basketball court, a playground, a baseball field, benches and lots of nice trees and tables.

Age group this park would be good for
This park would be a great park for everyone. I see different age groups there all the time.

Best things about this park
The best thing about this park is that it is really big. Also there are many different things to do.

Room for Improvement
Some good improvements for this park would be to clean up the trash. Sometimes it is really filled with trash. Everyone should throw their trash away.

Park Score Card
Recreation Factor

Cleanliness

Safety

Condition of existing features

Overall Score
**O’Neil Park** by Juana

Located next to the main library, Lawrence Street between Chestnut and Oak Streets

**Park features**

This open park has a nice view of two baseball fields, a nice soccer field, a football field, and a basketball area. There is also a sitting area where people enjoy playing dominoes.

**Age group this park would be good for**

This park is mainly for teenage and adult men because the men's baseball team uses it a lot in the summer. But this is also a good park for the girl’s baseball team, which is a great afterschool activity.

**Best things about this park**

The best thing about this park is the views and the sitting areas.

**Room for Improvement**

The Porta-Potty needs to be removed or better maintained, the park needs new benches and a splash of paint to remove the graffiti.

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Parthum School Park by Tanya

Located at 255 East Haverhill Street at Marston Street

Park features
This park features a big size baseball field with benches, basketball courts, a parking area, and trash cans.

Age group this park would be good for
Younger kids who play baseball or basketball would be good for this park as well as for teenagers or young adults.

Best things about this park
The best things about this park are the basketball courts.

Room for Improvement
The benches need to be painted; they have graffiti all over them. The baseball field should be fenced-in for safety purposes.

Park Score Card
Recreation Factor

Cleanliness

Safety

Condition of existing features

Overall Score
Plainsman Park by Rumaira

Located on Hampshire Street between Cedar and Auburn Streets

Park features
This park has benches and a walking path.

Age group this park would be good for
This park is located next to a senior’s home which makes it convenient for residents to walk on the paths or to sit.

Best things about this park
This park is a nice place to walk.

Room for Improvement
The park’s cleanliness needs improvement.

Park Score Card

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Reservoir and Water Tower by Rumaira

Located near the intersection of Reservoir and Highgate Streets

Park features
This park features a huge field and a tennis court.

Age group this park would be good for
This park is a great park for everyone. You can do many things here.

Best things about this park
The best thing about this park is the amount of space it has. This park is mostly used by people who like to run, jog or take a walk.

Room for Improvement
This park doesn't need much improvement besides less trash.
Reviviendo Playground by Tanya

Located on the corner of Newbury and Summer Streets

Park features
Reviviendo Playground features a playground for kids, benches, tables, chairs and a nice view.

Age group this park would be good for
This park is good for younger children under the age of eleven.

Best things about this park
The best things about this park are the playground and the benches.

Room for Improvement
The graffiti in the park needs to be removed in order to improve this park. As well the park should be better maintained.

Park Score Card
Recreation Factor

Cleanliness

Safety

Condition of existing features

Overall Score
Shawsheen Park by Rumaira

Located at Exeter Street, behind South Lawrence East High School and behind the pool along the Shawsheen River

Park features
This park has two baseball fields and a small playground.

Age group this park would be good for
This park is good for children and teens.

Best things about this park
The best thing about this park is its large size and the amount of space it has.

Room for Improvement
This park would be a better park if it didn't have graffiti and so much trash.

Park Score Card
- Recreation Factor: 5 stars
- Cleanliness: 4 stars
- Safety: 5 stars
- Condition of existing features: 5 stars
- Overall Score: 5 stars
Storrow Park by Tanya

Located on High Street at the intersection with Pleasant Street, next to the water tower

Park features
Storrow Park offers a nice view, has a large area with nice walking spaces, basketball courts, bike racks, benches, tables, gazebo, and a playground area for children, waste baskets, and also great space for parking.

Age group this park would be good for
I believe all age groups are good for this park since it contains many different things that will keep you active whatever your age. You can take a nice walk around the park and enjoy the view in its quiet area.

Best things about this park
The two best things about this park are that it has a playground for kids and it has a large space with a full basketball court.

Room for Improvement
The equipment should be treated with more care with less graffiti. Also, there should be more landscaping, by cutting the trees and grass, they can improve the beauty of the park and improve the view.

Park Score Card
Recreation Factor

Cleanliness

Safety

Condition of existing features

Overall Score
Sullivan Park by Tanya

Located at the corner of Route 114 and North Parish Road, next to Lawrence High School

Park features
Sullivan Park offers many things like swing sets, basketball courts, jungle gyms for kids, benches, tables, tennis courts, nice walking areas as well as a nice view and parking lot for the park.

Age group this park would be good for
Kids of all ages would be able to find something to do in this park. Even for adults who like to spend time in the parks.

Best things about this park
The best thing about this park is that it provides many things for kids to do including basketball and tennis courts.

Room for Improvement
The condition of the park equipment overall needs improvement. The jungle gym, swings, basketball nets, and overall how the park is treated can be improved.

Park Score Card
Recreation Factor

Cleanliness

Safety

Condition of existing features

Overall Score
Based on their experience with this project and what they have learned about the parks, the youth researchers have provided some recommendations for Lawrence youth, residents, and for the city government to increase usage of the parks and to improve their quality and condition.

**What can youth in Lawrence do to improve the quality and condition of the parks?**
- Try and keep the parks clean - don’t throw trash on the ground and don’t draw graffiti
- Get more involved - take part in community clean-ups
- Be pro-active and use the parks
- Be respectful, caring, considerate, and loving of the parks - respect them by not damaging the property

**What can the city government do to improve the quality and condition of the parks?**
- Clean the parks on a regular basis - send someone to the parks at least monthly
- Do something to improve the safety of the parks as people feel unsafe in some of the parks due to gangs - if possible put cameras in the parks for people’s safety
- Listen to groups like us who have researched what the parks need in order to improve the parks
- Pick up the trash bags and maintain the gardens that are in some of the parks
- Publicize the parks - tell residents about all of the exciting things they can do in them

**What can residents in Lawrence do to improve the quality and condition of the parks?**
- Take ownership of the parks and treat them as you would your home
- Treat the equipment with more care - try not to break or damage anything in the parks and pick up your trash
- Create murals instead of drawing graffiti with foul words
What can residents in Lawrence do to increase people using the parks?
- Go out more and enjoy the parks - have picnics, celebrate birthdays, exercise and enjoy the outdoors
- Parents - motivate your children to go outside and play rather than staying home, go out with them for family days
- Don’t litter - respect the parks and treat them properly

What can youth in Lawrence do to increase people using the parks?
- Tell their friends to join them at the park to spend time outdoors
- Do activities to spread the word about the little known parks - have festivals, block parties, get involved in projects with the parks
- Talk well about the parks and recommend them to others
- Maintain the parks and don’t draw graffiti

What can the city government do to increase people using the parks?
- Pay more attention to the parks and be more concerned with keeping them clean - this will bring people to the parks
- Educate the public on the benefits of using the parks for exercise and how good it is for kids to play in them through flyers, newspapers and TV commercials
- Do special events in the parks
**Groundwork Lawrence, Inc.** (GWL) is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization that has been making change happen in Lawrence, Mass. since 2001. Through environmental and open space improvements, community food programs, youth education and employment initiatives, and community programming and events GWL creates the building blocks of a healthy community and endeavors to improve quality of life in Lawrence through its commitment to “changing places and changing lives.”

The Lawrence **Community Development Department** (CDD) focuses on improving the quality of life in Lawrence. As the city's chief agency for community planning and urban development, the CDD oversees programs in housing, economic development, land-use planning, and transportation. Among the grants that the department administers is the Community Development Block Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, one of the largest sources of funds to help the community. The CDD aims to enhance the physical environment and improve the quality of life for the diverse community of Lawrence.

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