

C2C Ep. 17

[00:01:24] Welcome. My name is Lilly Weinberg, and I'm thrilled to have you join us. I'm Coast-to-coast. This is Episode 17. It's hard to believe that we've been on this journey for four months. I'm looking really at the future of cities and context of COVID 19.

[00:01:41] We've looked at all sorts of topics from mobility to equity, with really an emphasis on public spaces and technology. We're really thinking through what are the tangible, practical solutions that we can think through for our cities and for all of you who are in the audience today. Of course, for the parents out there, I'm including myself. What we do with our kids is on the top of our minds. I know I have a three year old who is in school and then his world turned literally upside down when all schools were shut down. So we're going to be looking at what are some of the solutions that we're thinking about for schools and really making them safe. How can we leverage an outdoor space during this time? So examines how schools can leverage green space during POBRE 19. And we'll take a look at how parks and public spaces can provide a safer space for outdoor learning. And we have a leading expert on. So I want to welcome Sharon Dink's, the CEO and founder of Green Schoolyards America, a nonprofit that supports schools and using the outdoor area, is more strategically to improve the well-being of children, their communities and the urban environment.

[00:03:00] So, hey, Sharon, how's it going?

[00:03:02] Hi, thanks so much for having me today.

[00:03:04] I'm thrilled to have you. Thank you for being here. I know all the parents out there are eager to learn more about what you have to say about schools and green spaces. So thanks again for joining us. And what I really also think is very, very interesting about green schoolyards America is that you guys are the co-founder of the National COVID 19 Outdoor Learning Action Initiative, which is helping school districts across the country use outdoor spaces as they reopen with physical distancing measures and play. So that's going to be a big bulk of what we're talking about today. So for our audience members out there. So the way this is going to work for. For you, Sharon and me, we're gonna have about 15 minutes for an interview. We'll go through a few questions around what you're doing now, how you're responding in context of COVID 19 and really kind of looking at the future. You know, after because hopefully covered will end. Right. And there will be a feature to all of this. So our 15 minutes of that and then we'll have time for our audience members to put in their questions in the Q&A box at the bottom of the screen or on Facebook or Twitter hashtag Night Live. So we'll have about tannish minutes to take live questions together. So with that and Sharon, let's let's get started.

[00:04:34] So I would love to start with some context setting, you know, for you to tell us a bit about your work with Green Schoolyards America and why you started this work. I know you've been personally involved with this for over 20 years and screen schoolyards has been and you guys have been at this for about seven years. So tell us a little bit about what you're doing and your your theory of change.

[00:04:58] Sure. Thanks. I've been in the green Scalia field for 20 years, originally started in grad school looking at the question of how do we make green cities? And it seemed to me that it wasn't a technical problem. We know how to make cities that are good for the ecosystems. But it's a consensus problem. And so I've been working and trying to solve the consensus problem of green cities, I'd say, for the last 20 years with the urban

planning background. And I also have the intersecting with how do we make great spaces for children in my work in general? And to me, a green schoolyard is a place that is a microcosm of the green city that you'd like to see. So it's a place where you can demonstrate how where the rain should go, what it falls, how it comes off the rooftops and goes down the downspouts and soaks into the ground, how you can plant trees to change the microclimate of your neighborhood and also directly protect kids from heat and how you can add wildlife habitat for the birds, butterflies coming through and grow food with agriculture and then also involve kids and teachers in the community, in the democratic processes that are that we'd like to see around how shared public space gets governed and decisions made for that. So for me, it's always been about that, that. Shifting a schoolyard into the place that you want to model what you want to see in the environment. And about seven years ago, after designing Greens clearance and working on participatory design in many schools, I decided to find a nonprofit, its clearance America, to work at city scale change and to work with school districts and ask them the larger questions that would, I hope, change the norm for for what we think of as a traditional school ground. How do we turn all of our school grounds into more parklike spaces that have benefits for children's learning and health and ecological systems and community access to public open space? And so we work with school districts and we ask them, what do you want the hundreds of acres that you manage to do for your kids and your community? How do you want it to be? Resources for education? How do you want it to help mental and physical health and the ecosystems? And we're thinking about this, too, on the larger scale and the state scale where we live. For example, in California, we have 10000 thousand schools and they are collectively on one hundred and thirty thousand acres of land with a daily user rate of six point two million kids and several hundred thousand adults. And so that makes it some of our most heavily used public land, a public park space. But we're not investing in it as if it matters and is if it is the most funding state. So that's the frame we bring to this. We start from the kind of land base of it and add and ask what we want from our shared public space and how we can act together to make it better.

[00:07:53] With what's so interesting about this is that schools, what you said is so powerful because schools take up so much of the land within our cities, but we don't think about that land as part of kind of the bigger picture of our, you know, public space.

[00:08:12] And so this is really an interesting, holistic look that I don't think it's necessarily new. My understanding is in Scandinavia, many countries are looking at it more holistically that this is all part of the public land and in their country. But in the United States, that's not necessarily a common practice. Is my understanding. Right.

[00:08:33] Right. Right. And I also co-founded an organization called the International School Grounds Alliance. And so we meet with colleagues from Europe and Asia and elsewhere and look at how they use land. And we're trying to essentially with Green Scullion's America here, trying to look at which of those ideas would fit in our context that had been our tried and true and that have resulted in large scale shifts that are really positive for kids and the environment. And so we looked to Berlin, Germany, for example, where 25 years ago they made a law that every school property and I think every parcel has to absorb all of the rain that falls. And with that one, public policy change, 400 schools, almost completely unpaved, about 20, 25 years ago. And now they have what they called sponge schoolyards, which has absorb all of their stormwater and which have forests where on all the school grounds. And so you have kind of global setup for climate resilience and nurturing children in park like spaces. And so that's what we're trying to

model. We know it works. It's been done. It's been done decades ago. And yet we're slow to. Yes.

[00:09:42] Right. And so I want to also linked to your book, *Asphalted Ecosystems*, which also, well, goes in more in depth than in the concepts that you're talking about. And a couple of things. It's a win for children. Right. But it's also a win for cities from what I'm hearing, it you know, it's a micro it's starting with the schools and it's a micro ecosystem of what you want your cities to be, which makes perfect sense. So thanks for that. That set up in that context, setting for it for what you do. The really important work.

[00:10:15] And what I want to now talk about this crazy moment in time that we're end with with in the middle of a pandemic and with COVID 19. And the work that you've done has become incredibly relevant during COVID 19. And so. So can you tell us why? Why is it relevant and how your organization is responding?

[00:10:42] Sure, yeah. This time has been, as we all know, just just an incredibly challenging one. And from a school perspective, it's really hard for schools to reopen with physical distancing measures in place because our buildings just weren't built to have enough space inside for kids six feet apart. Get them in the classroom.

[00:10:59] And they weren't built with ventilation systems capable of filtering a pandemic from the air. So we have space problems and air quality problems inside our buildings. And we also know that kids during this time are experiencing trauma in their lives from separation from one another, from watching family members or friends be ill during the pandemic. So they're going to be returning to school with a lot of mental health problems. And also adults also are feeling that stress. And so bringing them outside not only has more space and better air quality, but also the therapeutic value of landscape is right there. We know that trees and nature calm our nervous systems can help us reduce stress and be able to focus better. And so we see that as a positive for going outside as well. And it's also being online is also caused and exacerbated inequalities, existing inequalities in our classroom. And it's vitally important that we bring as many kids back, particularly the most vulnerable as soon as possible, so that they can have caring, nurturing, stable environments at school with adults who they can support them in all ways. And so bringing kids back and not everyone has been able to access Wi-Fi equally or access their computers equally and so that we've seen massive learning loss. So returning to school is a priority, but doing so in a way that is healthy and within health guidance is very important. So to meet that need and to address those concerns, we collaborated with four other three other partners. Lawrence Hall of Science, which is the Science Museum, Ten Strands, which is a nonprofit and a San Mateo County Office of Education to create something called the National Kovik 19 Outdoor Learning Initiative, which supports schools and districts around the country and their efforts to be open safely and equitably using outdoor spaces as strategic, cost effective tools that can maximize the number of kids you can safely return to campus with physical distancing. And we've been building this initiative over the last two and a half, three months to three months. And we're joined now by about fifteen other organizations and hundreds of volunteers. We're helping us write an online free how-to manual. So if a school or district wants to be able to say, yes, this is a good idea, I want to take our kids outside to solve those problems we're talking about, how do we do it? We want to have the answers to how do you do it on our web site. And we are not going to be one giant manual that's downloadable as a book. It's more of a series of frequently asked question answers that are set out in order to explain to different communities or and different people within educational systems how this might work. And we have some of the pieces already online, the site planning pieces, for example, that will

help a principal work with their teachers to walk their site and see where classes could physically sit and think about what the materials would be that they would use and what it might cost and run through some of the logistics to figure out how they can go outside. There's lots of other pieces of the manual coming soon and where we know that schools don't have very good schools, have very different types of landscapes. And so we're also thinking about if you don't have enough space on your own school brand, how might you go to a local park or a street like we're doing for restaurants and so many cities to have space outside? And we're also seeing this as a potential new plan A for schools right now. Their first plan is to go online or to go inside. So we're saying in general, what if you're your plan? A. could be going outside and staying outside whenever conditions were right for your school to be outside and then coming in, going to the backup plan of online or inside when you need to. And so for some schools that those conditions shift with the weather, it's too hot in the fall. In Southern California, you might wait until it cools off. If it's too cold in the northeast in the winter, you might come in when it gets really cold. And so we're helping us, helping with things through some of the logistics around what would make it easier to stay out for plan a longer like adding tents or making sure every kid has the right clothing to be outside.

[00:15:26] Right. Right. And I love that. But this is the plan A that you're thinking about. You said a few things that you guys have built a toolkit for schools to be able to navigate this new territory.

[00:15:39] So we're going to link. To the National Coba 19 Outdoor Learning Initiative, where it has all of the tool kit and all the information around this. So for our audience members to access it and you said something interesting around the weather, because I think that that's that's probably a pushback that that many folks have, whether it's it's too hot or too cold. And when we had a chat before this, I said, well, you know, Sharon, I have a bunch of communities in the Dakotas. How are they going to do this? And you talked a little bit about the working groups and the regions. And you told me a little bit about a working group from Vermont, Maine and how they're thinking about it. Could you share a little bit about that and how they were thinking about, you know, that the outdoor learning?

[00:16:29] Sure. So we've had 10 working groups working on this on various aspects of these questions for the last couple of months. And one of them is the Outdoor Infrastructure Working Group, which has been focusing on questions about whether and where we will put our weather based answer document online or idea document really online in the next couple of weeks. And it's almost finished.

[00:16:50] And I think it's that.

[00:16:56] Responses to weather are very cultural. More than then, driven by the actual temperature, the schools in the Northeast tell us they're comfortable being outside. Many of them until 10 degrees from Miami.

[00:17:11] So that sounds crazy. But some people might think it's cold. I get it. People told me it's cold at 50. Right. Yes. We come inside to kill for reasons sometimes at 35, 40. Yeah, I think it's relative and that's OK. Trying to help people be comfortable where they are.

[00:17:27] I think it's more focused more on the idea of adults can relate to the concept of outdoor dining and wanting to be outside and those picnic tables with the umbrellas and sitting outside in a comfortable place. And so how do we extend the comfort in the

restaurant context? When we built our dining, we put up shade umbrellas, we pull out heaters if we need to. And it's a little cold. Some of those, of course, need to be checked to meet safety standards for children are built. But the idea is generally the same. How do you feel more comfortable outside when everyone has a warm enough coat and rainbows? If it's raining, there are these fabulous head to toe jumpsuits for rain. That forest schools even up in the north, used to be to have their kids outside all day, even when it's damp. The kids enjoy it, but the idea is to make people comfortable. So if that involves the tent, put up a tent. If it. Yeah. So there's many solutions. And I think we will be outlining those and describing what they are in this document.

[00:18:27] Right. And so for folks who want to look more at the working groups, we're also going to link to specifically those working groups. And so and you talked a little bit about, you know, whether it's a tent or whatever, you know, this doesn't have to be incredibly fancy, what outdoor learning looks like.

[00:18:44] So I would like to ask for us to flash up. We have a couple of pictures of what this could look like for these pilots, Sharon, or prototypes of what outdoor learning can look like. Or is this an actual example?

[00:18:59] This is an actual example from a school called Gulistan Education and elsewhere, you know, California, where they had it running. They were running a summer program and they built outdoor classroom spaces, too, to run their summer program. And they had a Kovik health protocol that they used that kept everyone healthy all summer. And they've just OPD with a waiver from the health department because their protocol meets code for that for the fall. So they're now in session as well, using the space, although it's transformed into a bigger, more a bigger tent over it.

[00:19:30] Amazing. But it's not fancy, but it does the job right. And then here's another example that we pulled. Can you tell us about this one?

[00:19:38] Yeah, it's the same school. And this is an example of what we were recommending, that schools look first to what they already have before they buy anything new. And so these were desks that were literally in the school's basement that weren't in storage. They weren't being used. And so they pulled them out and made them their outdoor learning stations. And they just added attention so that it would stay out of the sun and out of a light drizzle. And so that's that's what they use also in summer, same school. Great.

[00:20:06] Great. So with this, before we take some questions from the audience. I want to ask you, what do you know? Obviously, this is a stressful time for all of us with with coalbed and but but with crisis brings opportunity.

[00:20:25] And I think the fact that we're all talking about this, the fact that so many schools that you're leading the way, you know, to are thinking about how do we leverage the outdoors. What do you think is potentially the opportunity for the future of how we think about, you know, schools and outdoor spaces and our cities?

[00:20:47] Well, it's been really exciting to see schools and districts try outdoor learning for the first time, we've been one of our working groups I didn't mention earlier, which is a group that's a community of practice for early adopter schools and districts who are waiting for the manual to come out her diving right in and making plans and are some of them already have opened outside.

[00:21:06] And so I think what we've seen from that experience is that some schools that I've never tried after learning are considering this to be an option to go to scale with right now. And we hope that once they're out there that they'll find themselves really comfortable in this environment. And just as when we move restaurant dining outside, we find ourselves really comfortable out there and say, why did we sit inside all the time when there's all this nice? It's nice to be outside. So we hope that a lot of schools will see that. We hope that they will also see that there are hands on learning resources all around them. If you go outside and if it's a school's first time outside, they'll probably take their indoor curriculum out, which is great. But when you've been out there for longer, you can start to build on and add to the resources you have in your teaching tool box by using the environment as something to learn from as well as in.

[00:21:57] Yeah. And I wonder, Sharon, too, if there is an opportunity for us to just be reimagining the relationship that we have between parks and schools, too. You know, you said that now some schools are potentially leveraging, you know, Parks and Rec during this time, too.

[00:22:14] So we'll say definitely one of our working groups is working on the topic specifically about how to best set up relationships between school districts and park systems.

[00:22:23] And the city might be able to open the sidewalk or closed streets temporarily like they're doing in New York City right now as they plan to scale up. And so we're trying to help make that easier. Schools and parks haven't traditionally been in the United States in private, the same planning unit as they are in Europe, which is a little easier to plan together. But they are both public and public lands for public benefits. And it would be wonderful to see them weaving their balls together and collaborating more in the future as well.

[00:22:52] Absolutely. Especially in our and our denser communities. OK, great. So let's let's take some questions that we have from the audience. So the first one that I see is around a question about engagement.

[00:23:05] So how engaged have families and their students been willing to be and what have been some best practices?

[00:23:12] And in gauging with the families during this time, we have another working group working on community engagement recommendations and this being online shortly where we are recommending that the communities be involved in the decision making that the schools are going through right now.

[00:23:29] And I think parents are super involved in responses to Kovin. Everyone wants to keep everyone. They want to keep themselves and everyone else healthy and safe. And so I think that's been the priority. That's been kind of a triage moment. How do we do this? And. And it's easy to overlook all the people who should be involved in that conversation that we definitely think that all people who are affected, parents, students, teachers, principals, should be asked what they want for their school and be part of the conversation to craft the solution that they'd like.

[00:24:04] Mm hmm. Absolutely.

[00:24:06] And so there's a question, kind of a follow up around this for four schools that maybe aren't on board for outdoor learning. Are there any techniques or, you know, part of a toolkit that can help persuade them perhaps to get on?

[00:24:26] Yeah, I think that there are. I mean, you can come outside. It's beneficial to be outside as much as possible. So, yeah, that could be during class time, but it also could be at lunch or it's a school service breakfast.

[00:24:35] And those are times of days when all the kids and all the adults who are eating will have their masks off. So what better time to be outside or the air's fresh and the breeze is blowing and transmission rates are much lower. So just having meals outside, it's important to have a p e outside, potentially having music outside if you can space kids apart, heading out to a library outside. Mm hmm. Things like that. We spoke with one librarian who had designed a whole outdoor library program because she knew that she was going to be asked to see 500 kids at her school and wanted to make sure that they were not all coming through an indoor space where she was. And so it created an after library program. So it's not just the classrooms, but definitely any specialty programs benefit from being outside. So the more of the day that can be out, the better.

[00:25:26] Absolutely. So one of the things that you said was around dressing appropriately.

[00:25:32] Right. And especially, as you know, whether it's going to be changing. And and so there's a question kind of around the equity piece of that. And so, you know, how can we ensure that children have the proper clothes to be able to, you know, withstand the cold weather? You know, for outdoor learning. How do you guys put any fat into that?

[00:26:01] Yes, but we think that the clothing should be considered part of the infrastructure of our classrooms and that it should be budgeted for along with the tents, conceding that it is something that that that every child needs. And so there could be it schools could handle that differently to assess how many of what they need to buy, food, clothing. But we think that they should check and make sure that every child has warm enough clothes and either talk to retailers who might be able to give them bulk purchases of new items or some. We've at least one district talking about trying to source high quality used clothing to be able to hand it out for free as well. They didn't have a budget for for it yet, but we think that it's central to be able to do it in. The best way to do that is to think of it as infrastructure for being outside. It's part of the gear that's needed. And so it should be provided by the same centralized school processes that are building now.

[00:26:59] Absolutely. I love that it's part of the infrastructure. It is just just part of what has to be done. When I was in.

[00:27:08] When I was in Copenhagen, Sharon, I think we told you this before, but, you know, when they had bad weather

[00:27:16] Well, when I claimed there was bad weather, they said, no, no, no, no. There's no such thing as bad weather. There's just bad clothes. And you know that we all that you just have to be prepared. And making sure that our children are protected is critical. So it seems like you're absolutely thinking about that. So there's a question around and you highlighted this about the budgeting piece. And you know that you put this in the budget. But, of course, you know, schools are, you know, you don't have as much resources as they've had before. Many are really stressed, actually, financially. And so how how what

part of the school budget are you recommending that we pull these funds for? To implement these ideas, you know, around outdoor learning? Have you guys thought about that?

[00:28:04] Yeah, I think that the budgets follow priorities and it's a question of making this a priority when everyone thought that plan should be online, learning their funds came out of the woodwork to buy computers and also the indoor. Indoor screens like pieces of Plexiglas are going in everywhere. That money is coming from. It is because schools are focusing on indoors as a priority. It exists. And we imagine that that can be shifted. When you say our priority is to be outside the same resources, then those pieces of the budget could potentially lead after learning. We have heard some school districts are using Kahzrak funds to build the classrooms as they would to to shift indoor classrooms. We've heard others doing fundraisers around and around their programs. But I think that we need to put it in the same category as providing the infrastructure to go online or providing the infrastructure to be safe inside and thinking about what are the costs to society if we can't get our kids back in a safe way. All those parents who are out there trying to trying to work with kids at home or or whose equity was kids who can't access any school unless they come back, if inside doesn't have enough space and not and not enough air quality, good enough air quality, then we know we can't shift that piece of the economy forward. And so I think it should be a priority and should be prioritized.

[00:29:38] Absolutely. It is what you said earlier and we have to wrap up. But the time flew by. But this is about being Plan A..

[00:29:47] Right. This is Plan A.. And this is the priority. We're in a crisis. And we have to figure out how to make sure this is a priority within our communities and how it is the priority for our kids. And so with that. Sharon, thank you so much for talking with us about how we can leverage green spaces for our schools during this very, very dynamic time during the pandemic.

[00:30:17] I really appreciate it. I appreciate your leadership during this time and how you are working with hundreds and hundreds of schools across the country. There were a bunch of questions in the chat around looking at pictures, finding out more information for everyone who wants to have more information. We linked everything into the chat box below and the Zoom webinar.

[00:30:42] And so you can have access and it's really, really easy to go on Green Schoolyards Web site and everything is on there around the covered response where you can get more involved and you can learn practically around how to do this in your community. Good luck, Sharon. With your work and and and thank you for sharing this very, very valuable information for our viewers out there. Next week, we are going to have Gabe Klein on our show and we'll be talking about the future of budgeting and how cities can really look at their budget. And during this really difficult, dynamic time. And so with that. See you next Tuesday at 1:00 p.m. Eastern. Take care.