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Testimony Submitted by

**Kate Brashares, Executive Director, Edible Schoolyard NYC
Before The New York City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation
on *Improving the Equity of Green Space throughout the City
in Light of the COVID Epidemic***

October 22, 2020

**The Case for School Gardens:
A Key Strategy for Improving Equity of Green Space in NYC**

My name is Kate Brashares and I am the Executive Director of Edible Schoolyard NYC. Thank you to Chairman Peter Koo as well as the members of the Committee on Parks and Recreation for holding today's hearing on improving the equity of green space in New York City.

Edible Schoolyard NYC's mission is to support edible education—hands-on garden and food education—for every child in New York City. We partner with New York City public schools to cultivate healthy students and communities, transforming children's relationship with food and the environment. Today, we provide direct services and school garden support to seven public schools serving nearly 3,000 students and their families in Brooklyn, East Harlem, and the Bronx, as well as professional development to hundreds of educators across our city.

In this current period where COVID-19 has exacerbated so many barriers and systemic inequities in our city, school gardens are an important community resource that can, and should, be made available to all students and families as part of a comprehensive plan to improve equity of green space across New York City.

"So many problems are tied together, and they could all be solved by having a school garden."

This wisdom was shared by a fifth grader at P.S. 216 Arturo Toscanini in Brooklyn, which partnered with Edible Schoolyard NYC in 2010 to transform a cement parking lot into a flourishing half-acre, organic garden.

The student is right. School gardens provide tremendous community and environmental benefits such as distribution of locally-grown, organic produce and composting. These green spaces enable children to observe and understand where their food comes by making them part of a truly local food system. Garden education has also been shown to improve academic performance, especially in science and math; increase feelings of safety, peacefulness, joy and healing from trauma; and improve healthy eating attitudes and behaviors.

Importantly, school gardens support more equitable and culturally responsive education as well. They are welcoming spaces for all types of learners, including English Language Learners; school gardens encourage cultural, intergenerational, and community connections; and they





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are restorative green spaces for families who may not have easy access to yards and parks otherwise.

In fact, when we began this work with P.S. 216 over ten years ago, the surrounding community of Gravesend had the third lowest percentage of open green space in Brooklyn. Today, our flagship garden at P.S. 216 has vegetable beds, laying hens, fruit trees, an herb garden, vines and berries, pollinator-friendly perennial borders, gathering and seating areas, a kitchen classroom, playspace, composting, and a greenhouse. Last school year, P.S. 216's school garden served a school community of 725 students, families, teachers, and volunteers through garden classes, family and community events, and a weekly pay-what-you-can farmstand. The P.S. 216 school garden is also part of a network of Edible Schoolyard NYC school gardens across seven public school sites in Brooklyn, East Harlem, and the Bronx, serving nearly 3,000 students and their families.

While our school gardens are primarily learning and community-building spaces, during the coronavirus pandemic and while school sites were closed, our gardens pivoted to food production, serving as a hyper-local food source for the community. Since July, we have donated over 350 pounds of fresh produce from our school gardens to neighborhood food pantries, families, and community members. And while Covid restrictions kept the school garden temporarily closed to the general public during the summer, we have now been eagerly and safely welcoming our students back into our garden community for outdoor learning knowing that being outdoors lowers the risk of contracting Covid-19 and that replacing screen time with movement and hands in the dirt is more important than ever for physical, mental, and socioemotional well-being. We also continue to see first-hand the transformative power of school gardens, especially in this uncertain and traumatic time.

This summer, one of our school partner sites, P.S./M.S. 7 in East Harlem, was designated as a Regional Enrichment Center serving students whose parents are essential workers. The students were able and encouraged to be out in our school garden during the day. Our garden manager worked closely with the staff and assisted with garden activities and learning projects, including planting, watering, and harvesting fruits and vegetables during the peak growing season. Towards the end of the summer, the students and teachers were able to take home and cook their harvest. We saw again what we've known to be true—school gardens offer not only educational enrichment and a safe outdoor space, but also foster joy, wonder, comfort, and community.

Now that we have returned to school, the use of outdoor space and school gardens is more important than ever. In addition to physical health benefits, our students will require significant socioemotional support and enrichment as they recover from the trauma and disruption caused by COVID-19. As one fourth grader said about a NYC school garden: "Do you know why I like being here? Because this place is peace".

We urge the NYC Council Committee on Parks and Recreation to include existing and new school gardens as a critical part of the solution to ensuring and improving equitable access to green spaces, especially for communities of color and low-income communities that have been disproportionately affected by the devastating impacts of Covid-19. Specifically, we ask the Committee to consider funding to create more school gardens across our city and enhance





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current school gardens to support outdoor learning; to support staff who can help nurture school garden spaces and teach garden education, and to train educators across New York City to incorporate garden education into their instruction.

We also encourage the City Council to review and pass Int. 1663-2019 to help increase equity in green space by establishing an Office of Urban Agriculture and an Urban Agriculture Advisory Board. The Office of Urban Agriculture would conduct outreach, receive comments and respond to questions regarding urban agriculture, make recommendations about protecting and expanding urban agriculture, develop, in cooperation with other agencies and stakeholders, a comprehensive urban agriculture plan and make annual reports on progress made on such plan.

Whether it's hanging planters along the school fence or installing raised beds in the schoolyard, every public school can and should have a school garden. And, we believe every New York City student and school community deserves to benefit from the green and restorative space, socioemotional learning and academic enrichment, and connection to the land and community that school gardens can offer.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any additional questions, please reach out to us at 347-565-0100. We would welcome the opportunity to continue this critical conversation.

