

The Ugliest School Yard Contest



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In 1998, the Canadian Biodiversity Institute and Earth Day Ottawa organized their first annual Ugliest School Yard Contest for Ottawa. We chose the word “ugliest” because one of the meanings of “ugly” is “likely to cause trouble”. There is mounting evidence that the typical barren schoolyard is a major cause of conflict and “knock and bump” accidents. Also, multiple childhood exposures to the sun’s harmful rays in schoolyards lacking in shade can result in health problems in later life. Some schools did not want to recognize that their schoolyards were “ugly”, while others entered the contest because they acknowledged the fact and wanted to do something about it.

Nortel Networks provided funding for the Ugliest School Yard Contest and for planning and implementing a school grounds transformation project at the winning school. While there is only one winner each year, the contest encourages all schools to take a good look at their own schoolyard and reflect on whether it offers a life-enhancing environment for children.

The first-ever Ugliest School Yard Contest brought considerable media attention to a city-wide problem. Suddenly, the issue of bleak school grounds was on the agenda at many parent council meetings. For school boards and organizations advocating greener schoolyards, an Ugliest School Yard Contest offers a way to rally resources for school grounds projects. It is a way to benefit schools in poorer neighborhoods where fundraising may be a barrier.

It’s a sure bet that there will be no shortage of well-deserving entrants. When *Green Teacher* magazine posted a notice on the worldwide web in 1998 asking if anyone had ever heard of an ugliest schoolyard contest, the response was overwhelming – not because anyone actually knew of such a contest, but because everyone had a school to nominate. One respondent wanted to nominate every public school in New York City!

Twenty-eight schools entered our first contest. The competition was very stiff, but in the spring of 1999, St. Anthony Catholic School in Ottawa won the dubious distinction of having the ugliest schoolyard in town. As the winner of the first-anywhere Ugliest School Yard Contest, the school received funding for plants and materials for transforming their grounds and CBI’s assistance for a year. In addition to the prize money, media publicity attracted thousands of dollars worth of donated plants, labour, materials and expertise to the project from individuals, community groups and the private sector over the next five years.

Why not ask a local business or group to sponsor an Ugliest School Yard Contest in your area?

Acknowledgements please!

Please credit the Canadian Biodiversity Institute and Earth Day Ottawa as the initiators of the Ugliest School Yard Contest in your contest package to schools, media releases, and publicity.

Also, please let us know about your Ugliest School Yard Contest.

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Organizing a contest

Organizing an Ugliest School Yard Contest will help to put barren, sunbaked schoolyards on the agenda in your area. On the following pages are some basic guidelines for organizing the contest, together with some sample forms, which were used in our first contest in Ottawa.

You may adjust and copy the forms as you wish.

ORGANIZING A CONTEST

Here are some basic guidelines for organizing an Ugliest School Yard Contest.

TIMELINES	THINGS TO DO
One year to ten months	Invite a local group to host the contest. Consider seeking funding from environmental, nature and health groups, parent and teacher organizations, local governments, public utilities, foundations, and the private sector.
Ten months	Form a committee of members of the group or groups hosting the contest and other interested individuals.
Ten to eight months	Find a sponsor or sponsors willing to donate a cash prize. We suggest that you look for \$5,000 for the project itself and \$5,000 for project planning and coordination for one year.
Ten to eight months	Recruit an organization or individual to help the winning school design and implement the greening project. Make sure that whoever you choose understands the importance of involving children in every step of the School Grounds Transformation planning.
Eight to six months	Identify an uneven number of individuals willing to judge the contest entries (to avoid a tie when voting). Members of the organizing committee and the sponsoring group can be judges. You may wish to invite a politician or someone from the local media to sit on the judging panel.
Six to four months	Design your Ugliest School Yard Contest package and write a covering letter to send to principals and parent councils.
Four to three months	Send the covering letter, entry forms, contest rules and Schoolyard Information List to all schools in the city. You may also wish to send it to the local media and issue a media release describing your reasons for organizing the contest.
After sending the package	Follow up with a phone call within a few days to school principals, parent council chairs or environmental representatives, as well as the media to make sure that your package has been received.
One month	Choose a location for the Judging Panel to examine the entries. Each school's plans, mounted photographs and written material can take up quite a bit of space, so make sure you have enough wall or floor space to display all the entries for the judges to review.
Contest Deadline	Examine the entries as they arrive and make sure that schools have complied with the contest rules. If an entry is incomplete, the contest organizers should decide whether to call the entrant to give them the opportunity to submit missing information, or disqualify them automatically.
After the deadline	Display the entries for the judges. You may wish to invite the media to view the entries after the judges have made their decision. It is often very difficult to choose because of the bleakness of most schoolyards. The judges may find it necessary to shortlist the bleakest schoolyards and go on a site visit to help decide on the winner.
The winning school	Publicize the winner at a special award ceremony for the whole school community in the schoolyard. Invite local politicians, school board administrators, trustees, contest sponsors, volunteers and the media to attend. In media releases, encourage additional donations of funds, materials and labour to the project by individuals and businesses in the community.
After implementing project	Hold a special event to celebrate the completion of the project funded by the contest sponsors. Invite the local politicians, school board administrators, trustees, contest sponsors and the media who were present at the award ceremony, and everyone in who has contributed to the implementation of the project.

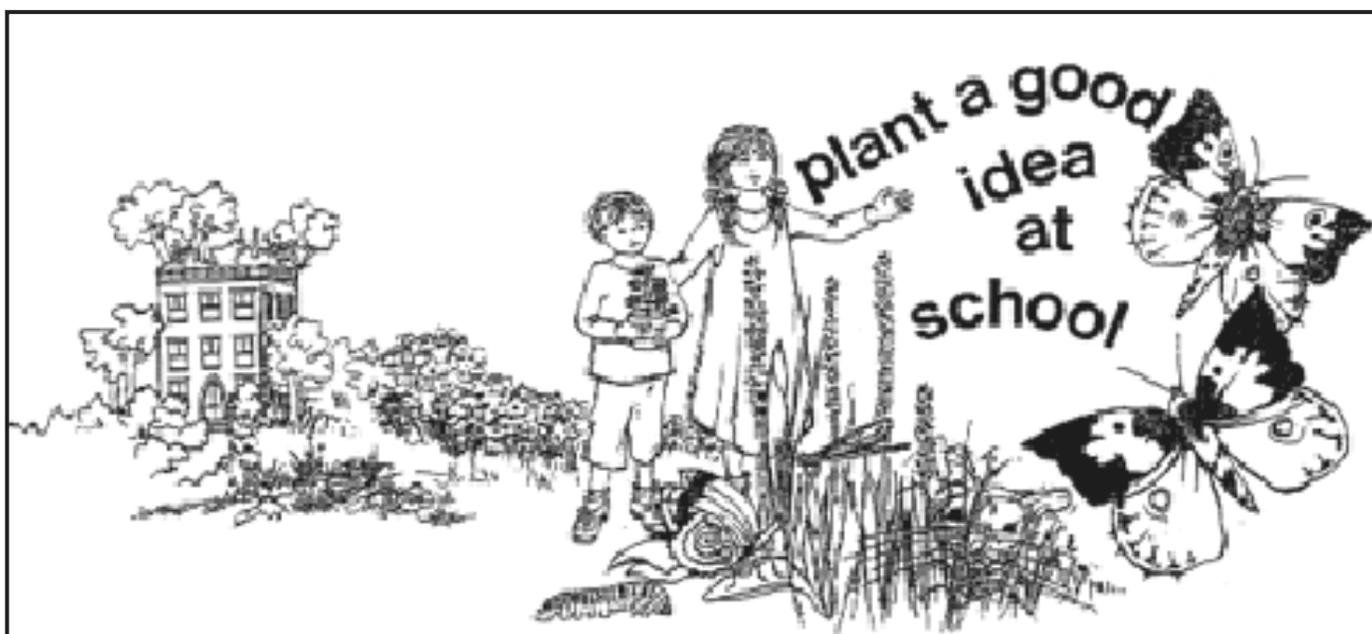
Ugliest School Yard Contest

Why not enter your school?

Take a good look at your schoolyard. Is it a comfortable, healthy, life-enhancing, engaging environment? Does it offer children a broad range of interesting things to do? How green is your schoolyard? Is there any shade? Is there anywhere children can take refuge from cold winter winds? Are there any quiet places where they can sit and talk other than on the ground? Can quieter children get away from boisterous play and feel safe?

If you think your schoolyard could be greener, healthier and more child-friendly, we invite your school to enter the Ugliest School Yard Contest. For conditions, please see Responsibilities and Commitments in the Sample Contest Forms.

You could win a cash prize
to start transforming your grounds!



Drawing by George, Emily and Ann Coffey. You may use the drawing if you wish for your contest material.

Sample Contest Rules

- ◆ Who can enter
- ◆ Letter of intent to enter
- ◆ School commitments
- ◆ Attachments check list

Who can enter

All K-3, K-6, 6-8, 7-8 schools (English, French, public and private) in the city/region, etc., can enter the Ugliest School Yard Contest.

Letter of intent to enter

Interested schools must submit a letter of intent to enter the contest to (contact person) at our organization by (date). This is for our own planning purposes only. The letter of intent in no way obliges the school to enter the contest.

School commitments

Schools entering the contest must commit to:

- ◆ hosting the launch of the project at their school site;
- ◆ erecting a suitable sign or map of the project on the site which will include the logos of our organization and the sponsor/s (to be paid for with project funding or through school fundraising);
- ◆ involving all the students in the school in planning, implementing and caring for the project over the long term.

IMPORTANT!

Please note that we have asked schools for the attachments in the check list below to assist the judging panel in selecting the most deserving school, and also to help ensure that the school community understands their responsibilities and commitments and fully supports the schoolyard greening project.

Attachments check list

Please attach the photographs of your schoolyard and the area you wish to transform, the required signed letters of support from the principal, teachers and parent council, and the completed Schoolyard Information List to the Entry Form and mail it to (mailing address) by the contest deadline (date).

Check list

1. **Photographs** of the area you wish to transform.
2. A **letter of support** from the school principal.
3. A **letter of support** from the teachers.
4. A **letter of support** from the parent council or its equivalent.
5. The **Schoolyard Information List**.
6. The completed **Entry Form** including responses to **Sections 1-3** on the form.

Sample Contest Forms

Judging

A judging panel of representatives from (name of organization) and the contest sponsors will review the schools' submissions on (date). If considered necessary, the panel may make a short list of deserving schools and conduct a site visit to help them choose the winning school. The winner will be announced by (date).

The judging panel's decision will be final.

Responsibilities and Commitments

Our organization will work with the winning school to plan the Official Launch of the project.

The school must agree to hosting this event and to holding an assembly of the student body during the day on, for example, Earth Day.

Our organization will be responsible for drawing up an agreement with the winning school and will help the school through the surveying and planning process, and assist in drafting the plans for the schoolyard project.

Our organization will also guide the school through the implementation stages of the first year of the project and provide on-site management, support and advice.

The prize money will be administered by our organization to the winning school for the implementation of the project following acceptance of the landscape plan.

Our organization will use photographs of your schoolyard improvement project to promote the contest to potential sponsors in future years.

The Entry Form

IMPORTANT!

Please read the Contest Rules carefully and make sure that you enclose the photographs of your schoolyard, the required signed letters of support and the completed entry form with the responses to Sections 1-3.

Also, please ensure that your school fully understands the responsibilities and commitments to the schoolyard project that are required of our organization and the winning school.

If you have any questions about the contest please contact:

Contact information:

The Ugliest School Yard Contest

ENTRY FORM

1. NAME OF SCHOOL	
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2. TYPE OF SCHOOL (Please circle)	K-3	K-5	K-6	K-8	6-8	7-8
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3. SCHOOL ADDRESS	
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CONTACTS:	PRINCIPAL
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	TEACHER
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	PARENT
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SCHOOL PHONE	
SCHOOL FAX	

SCHOOL E-MAIL	
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Please respond to the following three sections and attach your responses to the entry form.

SECTION 1. Describe your schoolyard.	
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SECTION 2. What improvements would you like to make?	
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SECTION 3. Why does your yard qualify?	
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Schoolyard Information List

To help the judging panel choose the winning school, please complete the following list.

1. How many children are there in your school?

2. What play and sports areas are available in your schoolyard?

Baseball diamond	Painted games	Other:
Soccer field	Hopscotch, four square, etc.	
Ice rink/hockey	Play structures for	
Basketball	JK SK 1-3 4-6 7-8	

3. Is there any shade in the yard?

YES

NO

If yes, where?

4. Are there any drainage problems in the yard?

YES

NO

If yes, where?

5. Is there any seating in your yard?

YES

NO

If yes, what type of seating?

If yes, where is it located?

6. What times of the day are your play structures shaded?

Never shaded	Before school	Morning recess	Lunch recess	Afternoon recess	After school

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7. Are there any trees in your schoolyard? If yes, please specify the following details:

Number of trees	Name of species	Height	Diameter of trunk	Location

8. What percentage of the property is:

	Paved	Grass	Buildings	Gardens	Parking	Other
%						

9. What do children see to the north, south, east and west from the schoolyard? (circle the direction)

Roads	Office buildings	Apartment buildings	Newer / Older residential homes	Natural areas	Farmland
N W E S	N W E S	N W E S	N W E S	N W E S	N W E S
Street trees	Hydro lines	Businesses	Little or no vegetation	Forest	Parking lots
N W E S	N W E S	N W E S	N W E S	N W E S	N W E S

10. How would you characterize your school's neighbourhood?

Inner-city	Urban	Suburban	Rural
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