

Browning Public Schools Tree Management Plan

Draft overview, June 2026

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Why Trees and Shrubs Matter for BPS School Grounds

Trees and shrubs are not simply "beautification" — they are a strategic investment in student well-being, school culture, grounds sustainability, and long-term budget. Research consistently shows benefits for schools and the entire community.

Academic & Mental Health Benefits (research-backed)

- Tree cover on school grounds accounted for **13% of variance in standardized test scores** across 387 schools; high school campuses with more trees show higher graduation and college-going rates.
- Students spending 60 min/day in nature had a **50% lower risk of mental health issues**; outdoor class time reduces emotional distress and improves attention — especially for students with ADHD.
- Naturalized schoolyards produce **stronger social connections, less peer conflict, more cooperation**, and more imaginative, active play compared to conventional turf.

Cultural Significance

- Native trees and shrubs are **living cultural teaching tools** — carrying Blackfeet language, traditional knowledge, and land-based practices.
- Place-based, culturally relevant learning improves engagement and academic outcomes for indigenous students and aligns with District cultural priorities. Labeling plantings supports language revitalization.
- Trees connect BPS to the **Blackfeet Climate Change Adaptation Plan** and community values of connection to the land and our traditional foods and medicines.

Grounds & Cost Advantages

- Established native trees and shrubs use **40–60% less water than turf** and require no mowing or chemicals.
- Mowing lawns alone costs **\$1,000–\$3,750+ per acre annually**; native trees and shrubs require a fraction of that in ongoing labor and inputs.
- Every \$1 invested in tree maintenance generates **\$5.82 in measurable benefits** — energy savings, stormwater management, air quality, and property value (USDA/California study).
- Tree canopies reduce ambient temperatures by **2–8°C (4–14°F)**, reducing cooling costs and making outdoor spaces usable longer each year.

What Is a Tree Management Plan?

A Tree Management Plan is a written policy and operational guide that provides a school district (or other land manager) with clear direction for planting, caring for, and making decisions about trees and shrubs. It sets standards, schedules, and priorities so that tree care becomes an organized, consistent part of routine grounds maintenance — rather than ad hoc or reactive work.

A well-designed plan serves three core functions:

- **Operational guide:** establishes planting standards, care schedules (mulching, pruning, watering, inventory), hazard protocols, and staff training expectations.
- **Planning and accountability tool:** documents year-by-year goals, tracks progress, and guides budget and resource requests.
- **Funding and partnership platform:** enables the District to pursue grants and formal partnerships with agencies such as DNRC, USDA Forest Service, Arbor Day Foundation, and Blackfeet tribal programs.

Adopting a formal Tree Management Plan positions BPS alongside other Montana districts and municipalities such as Billings Public Schools that have successfully reduced grounds maintenance costs, improved school environments, and built lasting community partnerships through intentional urban forestry programs.

Work Completed: The BPS Tree Management Plan (2023–2026)

The BPS Tree Management Plan has been developed over the past three years through active planting, community partnership, student engagement, and collaborative research. The following summarizes what has been built and what the plan now contains.

Planting & Stewardship (2023–2026)

- Over **200 native trees and shrubs planted at BHS** (2023) with support from DNRC, Blackfeet Environmental Office, and Glacier National Park.
- **~500 bareroot savisberry plants** established (2024); **>700 bareroot trees and shrubs donated and potted (2025)** by Montana Fruit Tree Company — cared for by BPS grounds staff, student interns, and volunteers.
- Student planting days at **BHS, BMS, BES, Napi, Bullshoe, and BNAS** involving hundreds of students and multiple community partners.
- **Arbor Day/Earth Day planting celebrations** held annually in collaboration with BFCC, BEO, DNRC, and MUCFA.
- Initial **BPS Tree Inventory completed (2025)** with MUCFA and DNRC — baseline for all future tracking and management decisions.

Community Partnerships Established

- Active partnerships with: **DNRC, MUCFA, Blackfeet Environmental Office (BEO), Glacier National Park, PLHI, FAST Blackfeet, Global Volunteers, BFCC, and MSU Extension.**
- Miinii Project launched (2024) — cross-disciplinary BPS team connecting tree stewardship to traditional foods, language, and culture.
- Initial planning for DNRC/EPA sub-award shelterbelt project (2026) for BHS Athletics and BNAS/Food Service building.

Plan Contents

The completed BPS Tree Management Plan includes the following sections:

- Mission, objectives, and alignment with BPS Strategic Plan pillars (graduation, culture, safety, attendance)
- Research-backed benefits of trees: academic performance, mental health, social-emotional learning, and cultural teaching
- Cost comparison: trees and shrubs versus conventional lawn maintenance
- Blackfeet Cultural Knowledge Statement and connections to tribal forestry and climate plans
- Complete BPS Tree Inventory (2025) with species, location, and health data
- Planting and care guidelines: site prep, species selection, establishment care, mature tree care, hazard identification
- Tree-related curricula connections and content priorities across grade levels and subject areas
- Staff training guidelines: grounds staff and teacher professional development with OPI renewal unit pathway
- Three-year implementation plan (2025/26–2028/29) with annual activity schedule and budget summary
- Community partner directory and funding source list with links and contact fields

If Adopted: How the Plan Guides Grounds Work

Board adoption of the BPS Tree Management Plan formally authorizes the plan as the District's policy framework for tree and shrub management. In practical terms, adoption means:

- BPS Grounds staff have clear, written standards for **mulching, watering, pruning, seasonal winterization, and hazard reporting** — integrated into existing maintenance workflows.
- Annual activities (Arbor Day planting, tree inventory, irrigation setup, fall planting) are **scheduled and budgeted** rather than improvised each year.
- Year-specific goals — shelterbelt installation, green ash removal, BES planting, signage — are **tracked against a written timeline**, supporting accountability and grant reporting.
- The plan serves as required documentation for **DNRC Urban and Community Forestry grants, Arbor Day Foundation grants, USDA Forest Service tribal assistance funding**, and other partner programs — unlocking significant outside funding.
- Teachers have a **formal professional development pathway** for incorporating tree-related curricula, with classroom-ready materials and OPI renewal units developed in partnership with DNRC, MUCFA, and community organizations.
- The District demonstrates to students, families, and the community that **the school grounds are a living part of Browning's cultural and ecological landscape.**