

San Francisco

Burton High School Athletic Field San Francisco, California

The student body of Burton High School, like much of the nearby Bayview/Hunter's Point neighborhood of southeastern San Francisco, is an encyclopedia of Bay Area ethnicities. One-fifth of the students are Filipino and another one-fifth have roots elsewhere in Asia; Latinos and African-Americans make up about one-quarter each, with the remainder a combination of European and other backgrounds.

With such a mixture of cultures comes an equal variety of sports preferences — and an abundant need for playing grounds to accommodate them all. Yet until recently, Burton High had no athletic field of its own and only a skeletal sports program in a community where children's health is a chronic concern.



The school's neighborhood, traditionally one of the city's least advantaged (where LISC has been a catalyst for new housing and business development), had little other space for organized physical activity. The local Pop Warner football team used to practice on another school's field, but that opportunity evaporated when the school switched to an arts concentration and scrapped its football program. As for Burton High, its first football team started playing only in 2002, with no place of its own to host games. The

patch of root-laced grass it practiced on didn't even have goal posts. It inspired little enthusiasm from other teams in its high school league.

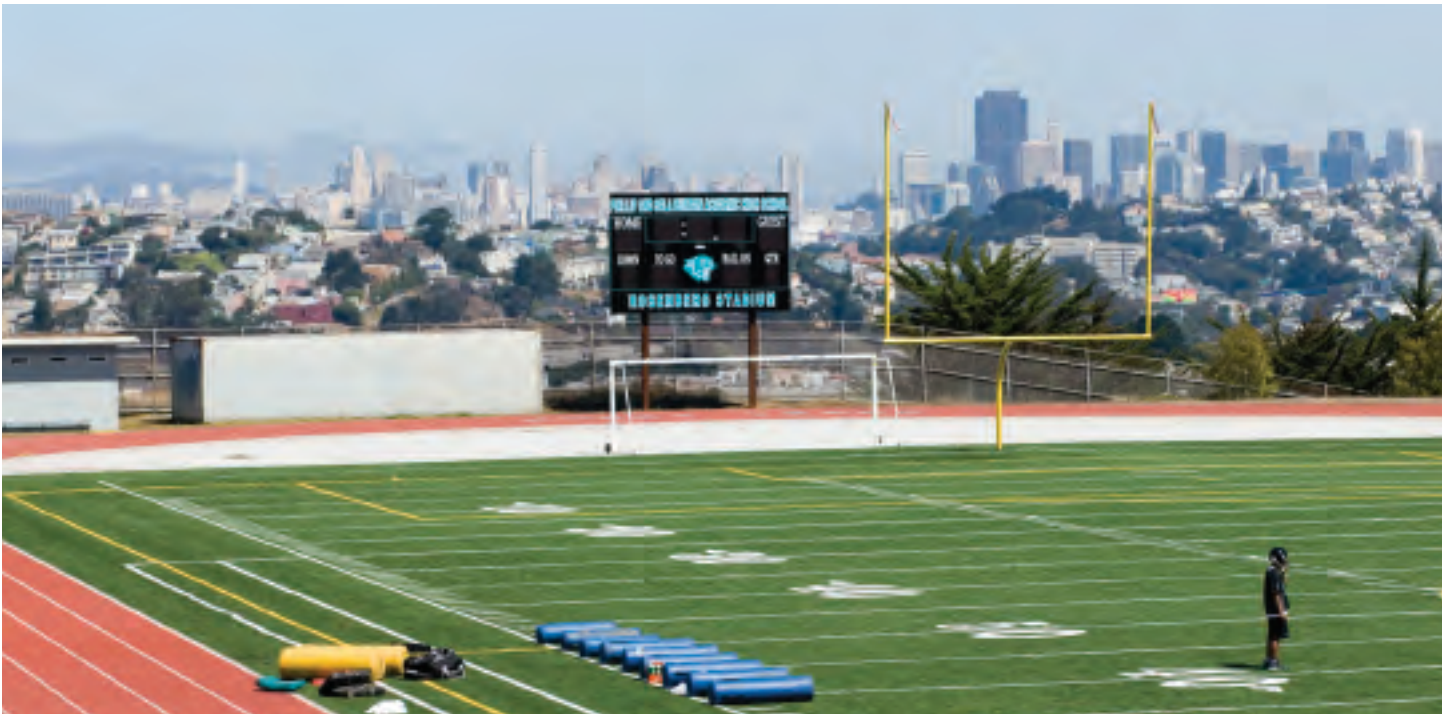
All of that changed in 2006, when the school hosted its first home football game on a durable new athletic field, courtesy of a \$200,000 NFL Grassroots Program grant and more than \$1 million from local philanthropists and other contributors. Not only does the new field (and running track and other amenities)

provide Burton students with an excellent surface to play on, but the school's relationship with the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department ensures that the facility will be available for the whole community. The sturdy artificial turf withstands unrelenting use by teams and activities of all kinds. The department estimates that it will use the grounds for as much as 1,600 hours a year — equivalent to more than one-third of all non-school waking hours all year long — for a full range of community recreation. Burton High also shares its home field, complete with bleachers, scoreboard, and concession facilities, with the 300-member Brown Bombers, the Pop Warner league's local franchise. In a stroke, the once-homeless league has become the envy of the city.

"The field is a great place to play," said Burton Principal William Kappenhagen, "but it's also a significant symbol for our students. It heightens their expectations and standards. It provides them with a place to play and embodies what their futures can hold. For them, the field serves as a reminder that there is something beyond the plight of their neighborhoods."

"Organized athletics teach kids about leadership, teamwork, cooperation, and opportunity. Essentially, we're using sports to get the attention of the kids, so they can learn to build other skills."

-Ranon Ross, president, San Francisco Brown Bombers Pop Warner league



For the parents and families of Bayview/Hunter's Point — most of whom live on low incomes with many working multiple jobs — safe recreation, exercise, and fresh air for children is a prime concern, but one with few ready solutions. As school enrollment throughout San Francisco has dwindled, state funding for the city's schools has fallen in proportion, reducing budgets for capital-intensive needs like sports programs. At the same time, rising demand for academic improvement has caused most schools to shift resources away from non-academic essentials, including physical education. The result — not just for San Francisco, but for cities all over the country — has been an alarming decline in the opportunities for organized physical activity and a steep increase in the total sedentary time in a young person's day.

The new Burton High field, and the swirl of school and community activity that takes place there, provides a timely antidote to those trends. "Organized athletics teach kids about leadership, teamwork, cooperation, and opportunity," says Ranon Ross, the Brown Bombers' president. "Essentially, we're using sports to get the attention of the kids, so they can learn to build other skills." Beyond that, Ross points out, "Having activities on the field, in the neighborhood, brings families together. It helps build a sense of community. Without this field, kids just wouldn't have much access."



*The new football field and track — the first in Burton High School's history — were built with a \$200,000 NFL Grassroots Program grant and various other contributions.
Photos: Lydia Daniller*