

eeGuidance for Creating Outdoor Classrooms



Definitions

Environmental education is an interdisciplinary educational process that helps people learn more about individual and community connections to natural systems, fostering environmental literacy and civic engagement.

Outdoor learning, or outdoor education, refers to a broad set of activities that include discovery, experimentation, learning about and connecting to the natural world, and engaging in environmental and recreational activities in an outdoor setting.

An **outdoor classroom** is an external shelter or space within the school grounds which creates a practical area for outdoor learning.

Outdoor Classrooms: connecting learning and health

As COVID-19 took hold across our country, one of the safest places for people to be was the outdoors. This led to increases in people using outdoor recreation facilities, seeing more people out walking and more gardens being planted. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) promoted outdoor activities, with appropriate precautions as safer than indoor activities.¹ In addition to being safer, **experiences in nature and greater access to the outdoors is associated with reduced stress, greater mental and physical health, and well-being.**²

The increased safety and benefits to emotional and physical health prompted schools and districts to consider the use of outdoor classrooms not just as a means to improve health and safety during COVID, but also as a resource that has benefits beyond the pandemic. **Outdoor classrooms promote increased interest and motivation to learn³ and boost academic performance.**⁴ This eeGuidance document offers strategies and resources for schools and districts to establish outdoor classrooms that benefit both the learning and health of students.

¹ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/participate-in-activities.html>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0013935118303323?via%3Dihub>

³ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/the_surprising_benefits_of_teaching_a_class_outside

⁴ <https://www.thestablecompany.com/blog/8-proven-benefits-of-outdoor-learning-for-school-children>

Using the School Grounds for Learning

When taking an inventory of usable space for learning, school districts should consider all of the available outdoor space that can be used for outdoor classrooms. Evidence increasingly suggests that the risk of the spread of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases is significantly lower in outdoor settings when appropriate measures are taken. Indeed, there is a large and growing body of research that demonstrates the benefits of outdoor learning for mental health and well-being, stress reduction, physical health, student engagement, and academic success^{1,2}. Outdoor classrooms are a cost-effective option for addressing the pragmatic need to expand school capacity for learning that will have long term and lasting benefits in other areas as well. Nonformal environmental and outdoor educators can be essential partners in using the school grounds and other adjacent natural settings for expanded classroom capacity. They can facilitate learning on the school grounds and provide professional development for classroom teachers.

Considerations for Establishing Outdoor Classrooms

- Assemble a team to assess, adapt and/or design outdoor classroom spaces.
- Explore opportunities with staff to use outdoor classrooms and other learning spaces (such as school gardens, greenhouses, nearby green space, etc) to meet state learning standards.
- Consult with environmental and outdoor educators who are trained to use the schoolyard and other natural environments as a context for learning across the curriculum, have expertise in group management and engagement in an outdoor setting, and are often specifically trained in addressing physical health and safety of participants in an outdoor setting.
- Partner with outdoor environmental educators who can facilitate smaller groups of students for safe learning.
- Explore opportunities to become a green school in your state to improve the health and safety of both indoor and outdoor learning environments.
- Design outdoor learning spaces to enhance meaningful, phenomena-based learning (i.e. pollinator gardens, bird feeders, intentional outdoor habitats, produce gardens).



¹ <https://naaee.org/eepro/research/eeworks/student-outcomes>

² https://www.childrenandnature.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/CNN_NatureImprove_16-10-27_O_newlogo.pdf

Steps for Creating Outdoor Classrooms

Assemble a Team

A first step is to assemble a team to help with the creation of outdoor classrooms. Having a broad-based team will increase buy in and usability of outdoor classrooms. Include:

- Teachers
- Administrators
- Parents/guardians, grandparents and other volunteers
- Community resource professionals
- Local business members
- Custodial and maintenance staff members (NOTE: It is especially important to include custodial and maintenance staff as they will be primarily responsible for the upkeep of the space)
- If you are planning on any food gardening, be sure to include your food service staff



Map Your School Grounds

Make a map of your school site. First look for any existing site maps, aerial photographs, or blueprints that can be used as a base map. If you can't find any of these, you will have to make your own map. The following website may be helpful: (<http://earth.google.com/index.html>). Include the school building, sidewalks, roads, fences, trails, parking areas, utilities, and all of the green spaces. Examples of green spaces include courtyards, grassy areas, athletic fields, gardens, wooded areas, and so forth. The map will help you study your school grounds and plan for outdoor classroom use.

Assess Potential Outdoor Classroom Sites

Using your map and the [Outdoor Classroom Space Assessment](#), assess and analyze potential outdoor classroom spaces and determine which sites are best suited for learning use and the modifications or resources that may be needed. Also think about the weather in your part of the state including times and locations where adaptations for weather might need to be considered (e.g. overhead shelter for rain or windbreaks in locations on the school grounds that tend to be windy. Also consider spaces near the school which might be used for outdoor classrooms like nearby parks or public spaces.

Explore Learning Uses

Once your team has determined the space(s) that are best suited for outdoor learning, consider who might use the space, how they might use the space and what learning opportunities could take place in the outdoor classroom space. For instance, a space that is relatively quiet might be ideal for

creative writing and reading or a space near gardens might be best used for science or art. Consider how the space could be best used—is there ample room for movement for more active learning or could multiple groups use the space at the same time? How many students could be accommodated in the space and what seating and shade/shelter would be needed for different learning uses (e.g. if students need to see a white board, is the area shaded or free of glare)?

Outdoor Classroom Design and Budget

Now that you have determined how you would like to use the outdoor classroom spaces, it's time to create your design. You will want to consider all the features you want to include for learning including whiteboards, seating (fixed or moveable), tables, shade/shelter, storage, learning features like raised beds or gardens, trash and recycling needs and aesthetics. If your budget is limited, think about which features are essential to start and which features you might wish to add on at a later date. Outdoor classroom budgets can range from fairly inexpensive to more expensive depending on the features included. Cost savings for creating an outdoor classroom include engaging volunteers, looking for donated items like logs or tree stumps for seating and approaching local businesses to donate equipment, plants or other needed materials.

Resources:

- If you need some ideas and inspiration, check out this article: [Six Key Ingredients for Creating an Outdoor Classroom](#).
- Watch this short video from Edutopia on [How to Build Your Own Outdoor Classroom](#)
- For inexpensive seating ideas, [The Outdoor Classroom—Where Do I Sit?](#)

Connecting Curriculum

Just about any subject can be taught in an outdoor classroom with little to no adaptation (see [Simple Ways to Bring Learning Outside](#)). Outdoor classrooms also provide unique learning opportunities. Here are some examples:

- Exploring weather
- Looking for patterns
- Observing phenomena
- Mapping and topography
- Sorting and classifying natural objects
- Learning about wildlife and habitat
- Exploring environmental issues
- Learning about plant, plant growth and cycles



Like planning for teaching indoors, having a plan for teaching in the outdoors is necessary. Teaching outdoors also requires some different management techniques (see [Tips for Teaching Outdoors](#)). With planning and preparation, students can not only have engaging and meaningful learning opportunities, they can also experience all the benefits of learning outdoors on their academic performance, attention, engagement and physical and mental health.

Conclusion

Taking learning outside is not just a good strategy for health concerns related to COVID-19. Outdoor classrooms expand learning opportunities for students. These recommendations can help school districts, teachers, and parents explore new ways of thinking about how and where students learn, and what sorts of partnerships can best support learning that is not only safe, but also contribute to a vastly healthier and more meaningful education.

Professional Learning

The Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education (AEOE) provides professional learning opportunities which include learning about outdoor teaching strategies as well as curriculum materials ideally suited for teaching in the outdoors. These materials are correlated to state learning standards and support development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Find out more about professional learning opportunities on our [website](#).

eeGuidance for Creating Outdoor Classrooms was adapted from eeGuidance for Reopening Schools (June 2020) developed by the North American Association for Environmental Education and AEOE, along with several other leading state affiliates.

About California's Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education (AEOE)

One of the first professional associations for environmental educators in the nation, AEOE is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization first established in 1954. AEOE's mission is to advance the impact of environmental and outdoor education in California. AEOE was established to provide a space for educators to connect, establish a supportive community, and share best practices for teaching about the outdoors and the environment. We envision a world where every young person lives in a healthy community with access to meaningful learning experiences outdoors. Learn more about AEOE at: www.aeoe.org.

About NAAEE

For almost five decades, the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) has served as the professional association, champion, and backbone organization for the field of environmental education (EE), working with EE professionals across United States, Canada, and Mexico, as well as globally, to advance environmental literacy and civic engagement to create a more equitable and sustainable future. NAAEE is the only national membership organization dedicated to strengthening EE and increasing the visibility and effectiveness of the field. NAAEE's work aims to provide professional development, access to learning networks and collaborative partnerships, tools and resources to promote effective practice, and leadership and capacity building. NAAEE is also involved in a number of field-building activities and signature programs, including the Natural Start Alliance to advance environmental education in early childhood and the Global Environmental Education Partnership—a global network dedicated to building capacity at the country level (see thegeep.org). For more information on NAAEE, visit <https://naaee.org>.