

Outdoor Learning Continues to be an Essential Option

As another school year unfolds within an ongoing pandemic we are more certain now than ever that outdoor learning continues to be an essential option for maintaining in-person student participation. With the COVID-19 Delta variant running rampant and the majority of school-age children not yet eligible for vaccination, the out-of-doors beckons where virus transmission is greatly reduced.



Teaching and learning outdoors is rewarding well beyond COVID and the important long-term benefits – which include improving mental and physical health, reducing the negative effects of trauma, and restoring students' ability to pay attention while under stress – are essential to our current generation of students.



We urge you to move and maintain your teaching outdoors in some capacity and invite you to find inspiration and guidance from our three position statements which provide sample outdoor teaching schedules, tips for cold weather, ideas for creating community partnerships, examples of small steps to take, as well as myriad links to relevant research.



Outdoor Learning Opportunities for Healthy Students

A SOLUTION FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS DURING COVID 19

Maine ❖ New Hampshire ❖ Vermont

*This position statement is the collaboration of the Inside-Outside advisory group.
Reach out for guidance!*

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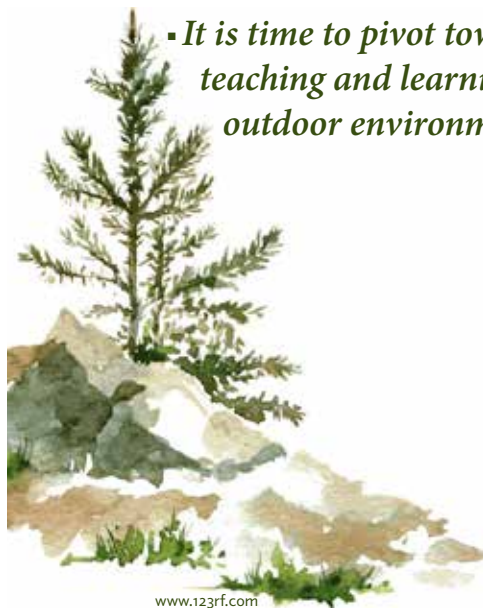
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As we plan for the reopening of schools, we recognize the complex waves of relief and concern that may overwhelm children and families. We feel this ourselves: desperation to connect with others, worry about loved ones getting sick, eagerness for uninterrupted workdays, sadness about social-distancing and mask-wearing. We believe this moment calls for focus on **equitable access** to safe, nurturing environments and **flexible pathways** to enrollment and participation that are responsive to the cultural, economic, medical and emotional contexts families experience.

On that foundation and in direct response to the pandemic, we believe that schools should consider outdoor learning as part of their plans for re-opening in the fall or in the plans for hybrid/distance learning. Time spent learning from and with nature provides measurable academic, social, emotional, and physical benefits. It is sound policy to increase its implementation in our schools. We encourage an outdoor, nature-based approach during the school day, and in scheduling the school week, that can take place on school grounds, on nearby lands, in public spaces or at home with school guidance.

It is time to pivot towards teaching and learning in outdoor environments.



www.123rf.com



Tunbridge Central School, Tunbridge, VT

Our perspective is rooted in current understandings of the COVID-19 virus and a review of the literature on child development, the benefits of nature-based learning, and mental health resilience.

Time outdoors protects against virus transmission.

- COVID19 Airborne Transmission
- COVID19 Risks - Know Them, Avoid Them
- Considerations from American Academy of Pediatrics

Nature-based education provides positive academic outcomes.

- Experiences with Nature Promote Learning
- Impacts on Learning Outcomes

Nature-based education offers proven mental health benefits.

- Nature Exposure-Brain Health
- Psychological Benefits of Outdoor Learning



Bulleted text is linked to additional resources.
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Equitable Access

Children have a right to safe, meaningful, and consistent educational experiences in their communities. Offering full-day, full-week learning opportunities is a way to ensure all of our children have access to developmentally appropriate environments including outdoor spaces.

Flexible Pathways

Some families may not be ready or able to send their children into classrooms yet, but perhaps may join for outdoor activities, or would welcome appropriately distanced home visits from their classroom teacher. Meet families where they are, support learning and connection in thoughtful ways and through defined routes of communication.

What could this look like?

Outdoor Half-Days

Each class spends 3–5 hours outside daily at its own home base. Morning meeting, read aloud, silent reading, math activities, science inquiry, snack, lunch, art, music and P.E. all lend themselves to outdoor environments. The opportunities for integrated place-based projects are limitless.

Sample Outdoor Half-Day Schedule

OUTDOORS

8:00–9:00 Staggered Student Arrival

After a health check in front of the school building, students make their way to their outdoor classroom. During the first hour of staggered arrival, there is breakfast available, a sign-in routine that includes a check-in with the teacher, and then students may play and work on projects around the space.

9:00 Morning Meeting

Spread out on seating in a wide circle, students greet each other and participate in literacy, math and science routines, reading the morning message or sharing a poem, measuring precipitation and recording the temperature.

9:30 Lesson and Directed Skills Practice

In lessons that take advantage of having space and natural materials students practice literacy skills, and connect with fiction and nonfiction texts. They investigate scientific concepts, use tangible math and feel history living around them.

10:15 Snack

10:45 Free Play and Exploration

While students pursue self-directed creative projects of inquiry, engineering, drama, and industry, there is also the opportunity for individualized and small group work with the teacher.

11:45 Lunch

12:15 Library, Art, Music or Physical Education

INDOORS

1:00–2:00 Classroom Work

Writing, reading, math instruction and practice.

2:00–3:00 Staggered Student Dismissal

Instruction and practice continue as group size decreases. A warm send-off is given to each departing student as they leave.

Community-Based Learning

Learn about your place—including indigenous cultural sites, covered bridges, downtown architecture, railroads, cemeteries, town forests, riverbanks, farms, orchards, stone walls, cellar holes, quarries, local industries, culverts, and mills. These can all inform and inspire.

Sample: Community-Based Learning

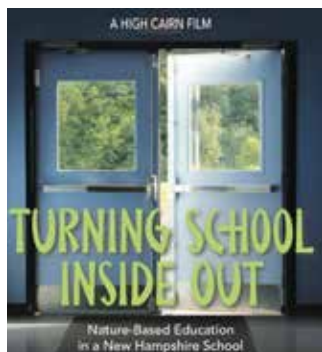
One class develops a relationship with a local farm and meets there, instead of school, perhaps on weekly or monthly early release days. Students gather to eat their breakfast or have a farm-product taste test. The farmer greets them and teaches a new chore each visit. Students move to work on small projects—brush clearing, invasive species removal, species surveys, water quality testing, planting, harvesting and such. Individuals may learn more specific skills with the farmer or a community volunteer. After a long work period, the class may spread out in some shade, or in a hayloft, to journal or to listen to a read aloud. Quiet reading time may precede or follow lunch, then students are picked up by parents or the bus. This same idea could apply to a residency at the city park or town center, town forest, the local fairgrounds, a river site, sugar-bush, pond, historic site, outdoor athletic facilities, or nature center.

Extended Outdoor Blocks

Alternate indoor periods with outdoor blocks of 60 minutes or more. Beyond the healthy option of free-play, activities might rotate between a variety of experiences connected to academic studies and community needs. Project-based learning, trail walking, “sit-spot” mindfulness, gardening, community service projects, scavenger hunts, birding, water investigations, obstacle courses or exercise circuits might be some of the options over time.



These short documentary films bring nature-based education to life:





Outdoor Learning in Cold Weather

Keep Moving through Winter and COVID-19

Maine ♦ New Hampshire ♦ Vermont

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Introduction

Snow or freezing rain will be part of many days throughout the winter months. *Do we need to go back inside, even as flu season and COVID-19 persist? No!* At least not on most days. What we need is preparation and planning, support and enthusiasm, and, most of all, warm and dry clothes to protect against rain and snow. All of this combined will result in joyful learning, enhanced safety, and positive results—*academically, socially, physically and emotionally.*

Since schools reopened for in-person teaching and learning in the fall of 2020 during a pandemic, in those *communities where teachers and their students have been outdoors in nature as much as possible*, the reported results have been excellent. The relatively low incidences of COVID-19 in Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire are associated with the widespread practice of mask-wearing, social distancing, and careful hygiene. Those factors have combined to create opportunities to do even more, safely, and consistent with educational and medical guidance, with positive results. Laughing children, relaxed educators, focused learning, and wearing masks as easily as wearing a winter hat—all of these have characterized what happens when nature-based education is the norm.

Does everyone need to be outdoors every day, all day? No, although that works well for many teachers and their students. Participating in outdoor learning is not a one-size fits all process. There is no one right way. We do know, however, that more time outdoors reduces health-risks and *enhances learning overall*, with a host of related benefits.

On that foundation, we believe that schools should continue to employ outdoor learning as part of their plans for effective education—throughout the winter and going forward. Time spent learning from and with nature provides measurable academic, social, emotional, and physical benefits.

It is sound policy to maintain and increase its implementation in our schools. We encourage an outdoor, nature-based approach during the school day, and in scheduling the school week, that can take place on school grounds, on nearby lands, in public spaces or at home with school guidance. In addition, when students are required or choose remote learning as well as other forms of schooling at home, we encourage learning to continue outdoors in backyards, neighborhoods and nearby outdoor places.



Photo by Eric Aldrich, Harris Center for Conservation Education
Jonathan Daniels School, Keene, NH

Our perspective is rooted in current understandings of the COVID-19 virus and a review of the literature on child development, the benefits of nature-based learning, and mental health resilience. For example:

- [*Do Experiences with Nature Promote Learning?*](#)
- [*Yes, Your Kids Can Play Outside All Winter*](#)
- [*Classrooms Without Walls, and Hopefully COVID*](#)
- [*Catching Corona Virus Outside is Rare but not Impossible*](#)
- [*Outdoor Learning: Another Option for Public Schools*](#)

Winter Clothing & Gear

Well-designed clothing makes comfort in cold weather possible. Wool, fleece, and other fibers that insulate and wick moisture keep the body's core warm and prevent heat loss from the extremities. In order to learn outdoors in wintry weather, children and teachers will need insulated, waterproof boots; warm jackets; insulated waterproof pants; fleece or wool hats and neck warmers; and waterproof mittens or gloves and, ideally, wool socks. Dressing in layers makes it possible to modify body temperature, adjust clothing to match activity levels, and adapt to changing conditions. Layering is especially important when it's wet or cold. Two lighter layers are better than a single heavy one, as more adjustments are possible.

All children and teachers deserve access to the high-quality clothing that makes outdoor learning possible. Equitable access must become a regional priority, supported by education policy and funding. As we work to achieve this, we recognize the many ways that individual schools and their communities are providing for children. These include organizing gear swaps, developing gear libraries at schools, purchasing clothing with parent-teacher organization support or grant funds, and fundraising for particular items such as outerwear.

Food, Shelter, and Activity

Wintry weather brings us back to basics. Nourishing food, warm drinks, *shelter from the elements*, and physical activities that generate body heat are essential.

- ❖ Staying warm burns calories. Children need wholesome snacks and a healthy breakfast and lunch to fuel their outdoor learning. Fats and carbohydrates are important in a cold-weather diet, so add coconut oil, butter, maple syrup or other such ingredients to familiar recipes and foods to increase their nutritional and energy values.
- ❖ Children need to stay hydrated in all kinds of weather. Replace cold drinks with warm water and soothing teas as the temperature drops. A large-size Thermos with a cup for each child or individual insulated beverage bottles that children can carry will keep liquids warm for hours.
- ❖ Shelters such as school buildings, pavilions, tents, tarps, sheds, yurts and hoop houses can serve as warming stations, with windows, doors and other openings adjusted for air flow. Shelters can also be used for sedentary activities and those that require materials or technology that can't be easily transported outdoors. *Children will need access to bathrooms*. If the only available facilities are in the school building, other shelters can be situated with proximity in mind.
- ❖ When out and about, keep moving! Teach lessons in segments and move from place to place between. Flap like birds or scurry like squirrels on your way to the outdoor classroom, follow the leader, play *Fox and Geese* or introduce other movement games. Keep mobility challenges in mind, and adjust distances, activities, and locations accordingly.
- ❖ Standing out of the wind, making sure clothing stays dry, and sitting on an insulated mat rather than directly on snow or cold ground are also important measures to take.



Photo by Ben Conant, Harris Center for Conservation Education

Greenfield Elementary School, Greenfield, NH

Materials & Equipment

Some familiar indoor materials serve equally well in the outdoor classroom. Others must be exchanged for items that are more portable and weather-proof. For example, whiteboards and dry erase markers don't function once the temperature drops. Chalkboards, individual writing slates and chalk work perfectly well. Plastic buckets with lids serve a dual purpose: they can haul and store supplies, and serve as portable seating. Padded lids provide some outdoor luxury. A heavy-duty sled, able to glide along a gravel path or weedy trail as well as over snow, is a versatile means of transporting large or heavy items. Even a smaller sled is handy for moving many supplies to the appropriate spot. Zip-lock bags protect field guides and other books when not in use. Pencils won't smudge or run in damp weather, as many pens and markers do, and waterproof paper makes it possible to record data or write poetry even when it's snowing or raining.

Winter Curriculum

Winter is a season of abundance when it comes to teaching and learning. Intriguing topics for study are at the ready. For example, set up a bird feeding station. What can we learn by watching bird behavior? Find, follow, and map animal tracks and evidence to see who uses the school grounds besides the children. Figure out how squirrels communicate, or create ephemeral art with ice and snow. Where is the deepest snow near our school? Where does ice form at the school? Where are the warmest places outside? The coldest? Investigate seed dispersal, shadows, microclimates and more. Observe trees and twigs, explore friction, force and motion on the sledding hill, and write stories inspired by outdoor adventures.



Photo by Susie Spikol, Harris Center for Conservation Education

Hancock Elementary School, Hancock, NH

What could this look like?

Sample Schedule: Indoor Start, Daily Morning Outdoor Activity

8:00–9:00 Welcome & Weather

After a health check in front of the school building, students are welcomed into classrooms where windows have been adjusted for optimal ventilation and seating supports social distancing. After a nourishing breakfast or snack, the teacher initiates an activity or lesson to orient everyone to the outdoor time ahead. Students also assess the weather by checking the indoor-outdoor thermometer and local weather report, and observing conditions.

9:00 Prepare to Go Out

Students prepare for the outdoors by using bathrooms, gathering needed supplies and loading them into backpacks or buckets, and donning layers that are suited to the day's weather.

9:30 – 11:00 Outdoor Learning Activities

Students engage in outdoor activities that support learning goals in one or more curricular areas. Warming drinks and snacks are integrated to minimize the time children are sitting still. For example, kids might drink tea or munch a granola bar while the teacher reads, gives directions, or offers children individual turns to share observations.

11:00 Indoor Follow-Up

Students return to the indoor classroom and hang outerwear and extra layers where the clothes will be dry and ready for next use. The students then engage in activities that encourage them to extend or synthesize their outdoor experiences, such as collating and analyzing data, or adding to an evolving adventure story.

11:45 Lunch

When possible, lunch can take place in sunny or sheltered outdoor sites.

Afternoon

The afternoon schedule can mirror the morning, and include a substantial block for outdoor activity. Or, it can involve indoor lessons with outdoor breaks or recess.

Another option is to start the day indoors, and move this schedule outdoors from lunch through the afternoon.



Red italic text indicates web links to additional resources.

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Growing Benefits of Outdoor Learning:

Lessons from COVID-19

Maine ♦ New Hampshire ♦ Vermont

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"COVID helped us change the way that we view education. It's not something that just happens inside our four walls. From the safety and normalcy that just being outdoors offered, we learned that this is better for kids in terms of getting them to engage in their learning . . . Our kids have thrived and I don't see us changing a whole lot, post-COVID. I just see us getting better at what we're doing. We're not coming back inside and closing the doors."

Sam Macleod, Principal,
Peacham Elementary School, Peacham, Vermont

Introduction

In the spring of 2021, **many schools are returning** or have returned to in-person full-time learning. Though the second school year in this pandemic will be drawing to a close with summer's arrival, the impacts of COVID-19 will continue. Educators and parents everywhere are looking ahead, **making plans** for the summer and the school year that will follow.

This is a good time to review some of the **lessons learned** from the past two school years where outdoor classrooms blossomed throughout the region, and incorporate those positive learnings into plans for schooling going forward. In previous position statements, we emphasized the **benefits from nature-based outdoor learning**. Here we focus especially on how to create those outdoor learning environments where natural areas are not easily available.

Create Opportunities for Community Participation and Partnerships

While the pandemic of 2020 proved to be a global challenge to our largest systems of government and healthcare, it also laid much more human-sized challenges before us. Could we gather 100 stumps for an outdoor classroom? Could we find someone to donate a cord of firewood? Could we string up some tarps for shelter? Very often the answer was yes, and classes were safely outdoors learning during much of the 2020 – 2021 school year.

Where and when community members outside the schools were encouraged to help design and create outdoor learning spaces, the challenge of providing healthy in-person schooling became a human-sized problem.



Peacham Elementary School

Successes followed. The examples of volunteers building creative and inexpensive outdoor classroom spaces are too many to count, as are the number of groups who each raised a few hundred dollars for things like student boots and rain pants. Workdays brought dozens of masked and physically-distanced volunteers on to school campuses, resulting not only in safer spaces for learning, but also in a deeper connection between community and school. Volunteers were parents and teachers, as expected of course, but they were also grandparents and retired contractors, college students and young business owners. Our inter-connectedness was laid bare and celebrated. People were grateful to help contribute to protecting and enhancing the important role of our schools not just in the lives of our children, but for the well-being of entire communities.

Think Flexibly and Embrace Variety

There are many ways in which it is possible to establish **places for outdoor learning**. Examples range from urban rooftops to city parks, on blacktop playgrounds and athletic fields, and even in the strip of greenery in a school's side yard. Some of us have easy access to forests, fields, and ponds. And yet teachers, administrators, and community members all over are making it work in a variety of settings with diverse challenges. What always helps: Start simple and ease into it.





Inside-Outside Position Statements

This is the third in a series of position statements developed by the Inside-Outside Advisory Group in response to COVID-19.

In the **first**, we made the case for the value of pivoting toward teaching and learning in outdoor environments as a healthy and educationally sound approach to managing the risks associated with the virus. We offered strong evidence in support of the positive academic outcomes and mental health benefits from nature-based outdoor learning. Because this approach is new to many, even long-time and experienced teachers, we provided a sample schedule and ideas to help get started.

The **second** position statement specifically addressed outdoor learning in cold weather. Once again, the statement reinforced that teaching and learning outdoors in nature results in joyful learning, enhanced safety from virus exposure, and positive outcomes—academically, socially, physically and emotionally. We urged schools and communities to continue outdoor learning post pandemic because of all the benefits to students and their teachers from employing this approach as an integral part of effective education. Because of the uniqueness of winter's weather-related challenges, the second position statement offered teaching tips and resources for additional guidance.

Bold italic green text in the body of this document indicates a link to additional resources.

Visit the **Inside-Outside** website for information about trainings and professional development opportunities.



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Rowe Elementary School



Think Big, Take Small Steps

We learned over and over again to focus on small steps. Large, complex systems tend to be overwhelming and paralyzing, but focusing on the human-sized efforts that will make a difference to your neighborhood school is energizing and empowering. Small and local solutions are fast, flexible and tend to be a better fit. Most of us can readily succeed with small-scale efforts and be delighted with our surprisingly good results! Focus on making the challenges as specific and small as possible, discuss and share exactly what they are, and welcome individual and incremental solutions. Here are a few examples:

- ❖ Create and celebrate small focused projects. Do things like **gather stumps**, **string up tarps**, raise money for boots, install **outdoor hand-washing stations**, sew face warmers, and collect second-hand raincoats.
- ❖ Respect and promote diverse solutions. Two elementary schools in the same district may answer a challenge differently, that's okay! Keep an eye on equity, share resources whenever possible, and let hyper-local contributions happen. For example, one school may have some carpools donated by a neighboring business while another may have tarp shelters built by a volunteer.
- ❖ Put out the call for contributions to the whole community on a variety of platforms. Retirees, twenty-somethings without children and everyone in between is looking to be helpful, so requests for donations and volunteers should reach them too, not just the parent population. Use social-media, local email list-serves, newspapers and bulletin boards. Leverage group mailing lists to reach more folks, such as asking if the town library, grange, bicycling club, or local event will publicize your requests every once in a while.
- ❖ Keep a catalog of local talents and resources that are needed. Reach out with specific requests to those best suited to fill them, or simply put out the call. People like to be recognized and approached for what they have to offer. It is community building to do so.

Schools in the News

CBS Sunday Morning
Forest Schools Outdoor Classrooms
Nature-based Education Consortium School Stories
Our Outdoor Classroom
An Architect's Perspective
Outdoor Classrooms
Schools Out(Doors) Report

Voices of School Administrators: Let's Keep This Growing!

"As I sat in multiple meetings about bringing students back to school, I knew we were fortunate. We had options. The guidance said learning outdoors was encouraged, and I knew we were more prepared than most. And so the students and staff embarked on a school year like no other... and headed for the forest. The teachers planned and set up classrooms with stumps for seats, pine needles for rugs and the sunshine as their natural light. The students pulled on their mud boots and, even with masks on, you could see them smile as they made their way to their base camps, their classrooms



Moretown Public Schools

outdoors. And so I asked the students, how is it going, learning outdoors?... They said, 'It is so fun.' 'It just feels natural to be outside.' 'I love connecting with friends and trees.' 'It's refreshing, educational, calming, and awesome!' In a year where everything got turned on its head, we went outside to find the balance."

Mandy Couturier, Principal,
Moretown Elementary School, Moretown Vermont.



Kingfield Elementary School

Johanna Prince, Principal, Kingfield Elementary School, Kingfield, Maine.

"Our funding and partnerships have developed through an organic leap-frog approach to connecting and engaging more deeply in the wider community of practice that shares our ideals. All these efforts were underway when the COVID pandemic changed the reality of education and daily living a year ago. The conditions of the pandemic, and the opportunity to expand our place-based education efforts, coalesced in a manner that has allowed us to more quickly move towards our vision."

"With the federal funding provided to support our return to school we have been able to accelerate our progress in teaching the whole child. We have added two outdoor pavilions, gear and staff to ensure that the opportunity to benefit from the outdoors is available to all who choose. Additionally, we have leveraged the will and passion of a small team of dedicated staff to create five outdoor classrooms that are used regularly, allowing us to be able to maintain in-person learning for the majority of this school year."

Marie Robinson, Superintendent,
Katahdin Public Schools/RSU 89,
Stacyville, Maine



RSU 89/ Katahdin Public Schools