



Growing Benefits of Outdoor Learning:

Lessons from 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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“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*



Peacham Elementary School

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.

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

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.



Moretown Public Schools



Kingfield Elementary School

"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.

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

"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

