



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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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.



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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.



Wild Roots Nature School, Chesterfield, NH



Juniper Hill School, Alna, ME



Harris Center for Conservation Education, Hancock, NH

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

