

# Environmental and outdoor education: key to equitably reopening schools in Utah



Reopening schools will require new or modified procedures for everything from classroom configuration and educational plans to arrival and departure schedules, transportation, and health screenings. The Utah Society for Environmental Education, (USEE) along with our community partners, strongly encourages schools and districts to collaborate with our community-based environmental and outdoor education programs to address the needs of this new school year through innovative partnerships and educational investments and policies.

**The outdoors is a resource for learning, engagement, and health, and it should be available to all, not just a privileged few. Experiences in nature and greater access to the outdoors is associated with reduced stress, greater mental and physical health, and well-being. (1)**

**Utah's community-based environmental and outdoor education programs offer some solutions to challenges schools face now and in the future. As with any strategy, these recommendations are not without hurdles, nor will they fully address all of the challenges facing schools. But environmental and outdoor education programs present some promising tools for schools and districts throughout the U.S. and are essential partners in creating a more just and sustainable future for all.**

There are several specific areas where Utah's environmental and outdoor education programs can help schools, students, teachers, and families. Including:

- Extending and Expanding Learning Spaces into the Community
- Using the School Grounds for Learning
- Supporting Teaching and Learning
- Creating Healthier Learning Environments
- Virtual Teaching and Learning
- Supporting At-Home Learning
- Specific, Utah-based recommendations

## **Extending and Expanding Learning Spaces into the Community**

- Maximize opportunities with environmental and outdoor education programs that are already designed for outdoor learning, where the risk of infectious spread is lower.
- Partner with the experienced environmental and outdoor educators at these sites to provide instruction, outdoor classroom management, and other educational support.
- Be aware that community-based programs are already adhering to the same health and safety standards as schools, as determined by state and local health departments, to accommodate safe distancing, frequent hand-washing, regular cleaning of high touch surfaces, and other guidelines to protect the health and safety of visitors.
- Consider rotating appropriately-sized groups to partner facilities over the course of the school year for equitable access (with enough time in between groups for adequate cleaning).
- Streamline field trip planning by using tools such as annual and/or digital permission slips.

## **Using the School Grounds for Learning**

- Inventory outdoor learning spaces and assess them for different uses.
- 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 curricula, 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 through the Utah Society for Environmental Education 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).

## **Sources:**

(1) The Health Benefits of the Great Outdoors  
<https://bit.ly/2DsDttd>

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## Supporting Teaching and Learning

- Leverage the expertise of outdoor and environmental educators to provide engaging professional development for teachers to increase their comfort and capacity to use outdoor classrooms and other learning spaces (such as school gardens, greenhouses, and nearby green space) for meaningful instruction.
- Use community-based programs such as nature centers, science centers, watershed education programs, and more who have the expertise and are already set up to accommodate learning, indoors and out.
- Partner with nonformal program providers who are skilled at working with teachers to design and implement programs that are aligned with and support the implementation of curricular standards.
- Engage nonformal educators as support staff/teaching assistants/content specialists for formal classroom teachers to support outdoor learning.

## Creating Healthier Learning Environments

- Engage with the Utah Society for Environmental Education's Green Schools programs to find ways to make schools greener, safer, and healthier.
- Make regular use of schoolyard and community green spaces and nearby nature for outdoor learning and physical activity to improve mental health, and consider policies for time outdoors as a part of the school day.

## Virtual Teaching and Learning

- Inventory the virtual learning opportunities with outdoor and environmental education programs in Utah, and beyond to provide independent virtual learning opportunities for students. Many of these are aligned with state standards and can be found on the Utah Education Network website. The Utah Society for Environmental Education also has a listing of environmental education programs from across the state.
- Plan virtual field trips if actual field trips are not practical, and create opportunities for students to explore new places and interact with outdoor and environmental educators.
- Work closely with nonformal educators to supplement virtual learning opportunities for students outside of school time with at-home learning experiences, virtual camps, etc.

## Supporting At-Home Learning

- Work closely with outdoor and environmental education providers to carry over learning into out-of-school opportunities that many parents rely on for childcare.
- Develop relationships with community-based and environmental and outdoor education partners that have already created resources to help support out-of-school learning for families.
- Incorporate lessons and activities that include opportunities for students to explore and investigate nature, either outdoors in a backyard, neighborhood, or park.

## Utah-Based Recommendations

- Guidelines for incorporating environmental education and working with community partners based on the Utah Leads Together Plan
- Ideas and resources that connect with the Science with Engineering Education Standards
- Information on how to connect with environmental and outdoor education providers

**For detailed information or to contact an education provider in your area, refer to the full report or contact the Utah Society for Environmental Education at [director@usee.org](mailto:director@usee.org) or visit [www.usee.org](http://www.usee.org)**

## Supporting Organizations



**FRIENDS of Great Salt Lake**  
[www.fogsl.org](http://www.fogsl.org)

