

Thriving Schools: Using Outdoor and Environmental Learning

A Roadmap for Schools and Districts for Use of ESSER Funds

Introduction

When the spread of a novel coronavirus forced the closure of schools across the country in spring of 2020, educators began to explore a multitude of strategies for a safe return to in person learning for students, teachers, and staff. The challenges and consequences associated with remote and hybrid learning models cannot be overstated, especially in our most vulnerable communities. But nationwide, innovative leaders and schools found creative ways to navigate those challenges. Among the success stories were schools that did what might appear to be one of the most obvious things they could do—**they took learning outdoors.**

From coast to coast, stories of individual classes, schools and even entire school districts relying on outdoor classrooms for all or part of the school day are popping up everywhere. These solutions are not just a way to facilitate learning when school can't be in session, it is a way to grow and strengthen our education system to nurture a range of skills and interests, help realize every student's unique potential, and prepare for whatever the future brings.

Environmental education, with its focus on **hands-on learning** and **authentic problem solving** can transform education. Using the outdoors as a context for learning across the curriculum is proven to promote not just academic success, but **enhance critical thinking, collaboration, and leadership skills.** These findings are not new—and proponents of environmental and outdoor education have been touting them for decades—but the negative impacts of school closures and remote learning, combined with the pockets of success in using outdoor learning to overcome those impacts have thrust the facts into a new light.

Environmental and outdoor learning **supports students' social emotional learning**, including more differentiated instruction, project-based learning, and providing more space for student voice and choice—all key to helping students develop a sense of agency and confidence.

It's time to take a fresh look at environmental education as schools return more fully to in person learning during the next school year and beyond and develop strategies to help students recover from learning loss, trauma, and isolation. This time of transition and reimagining education offers a critical window of opportunity to accelerate efforts to ensure every student gets to benefit from outdoor learning experiences every day.

Using ESSER Funds to Take Outdoor Learning to Scale

COVID relief packages passed by Congress in 2020 and 2021 provided nearly \$190 billion to help public schools overcome the challenges associated with reopening schools, maintaining a safe and healthy learning environment, overcoming learning loss, and more. [*The US Department of Education's COVID-19 HANDBOOK: Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students' Needs*](#) recommends that state and local decision-makers prioritize three essential goals:

1. Creating Healthy and Safe Learning Environments
 2. Addressing Lost Instructional Time
 3. Supporting Staff and Educator Stability and Wellbeing
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The broad and encompassing nature of these goals necessitates a collaborative approach, using all our state and community resources to achieve them. The opportunities for environmental education to play an evidence-based supporting role in addressing the academic, social and emotional needs of our students fall well within the allowable uses for these funds.

Following are specific, **evidence-based recommendations** for using outdoor and environmental education to enhance school and district efforts to address academic, social and emotional needs of students while maintaining safe and healthy learning environments:

- Annual Student Field Experiences
- Weekly Green Schools Activities
- Daily Use of Outdoor Classrooms
- Ongoing Professional Learning for Teachers
- Ongoing Outdoor Education Staffing

Sustaining Success: Staffing & Coordination

Funds allocated to local education agencies through the American Recovery Plan must be obligated for spending by September 30, 2024, giving school boards and district administrators just over three years to make investments that address impacts associated with COVID-19. This timeline also offers a window of opportunity for state and local education agencies to lean into the future of education, building capacity and infrastructure to support the Whole Learner and sustain innovation.

To complement investments in outdoor classroom spaces, field experiences for students, and green schools practices, education agencies should consider creating or expanding additional staffing resources to support effective implementation of outdoor and environmental education. Establishing a state-wide Environmental Literacy Coordinator would allow SEAs to take a holistic approach to environmental education, take stock of where environmental education can be integrated into the curriculum at every grade level in ways that support student success, and support LEAs in effectively using ESSER funds. **Outdoor learning specialists** at the school district level can provide localized curricular connections, additional instructional capacity for individual schools, and ongoing professional development and mentoring for teachers in using outdoor learning spaces and connecting outdoor experiences to classroom instruction.

Building in staffing supports for environmental literacy and outdoor learning at the state and district levels creates infrastructure for sustained success and deeper integration of regular and meaningful opportunities for students to learn outside well beyond this time of transition in education.