

New Mexico Outdoor Learning

GUIDANCE FOR 2020–2021 SCHOOL REENTRY



The outdoors is a resource for enhancing learning, social engagement, and health and should be available to all New Mexico students in every community. Experiences in nature and access to the outdoors are associated with greater health and wellbeing and academic success.

In New Mexico, children are experiencing higher rates of stress, depression, obesity, diabetes, and other health risks. These health risks, which increase with health inequity, have been further exacerbated by the pandemic; utilizing outdoor spaces for academic learning and incorporating environmental education into school curricula can help reduce these risks and inequities. COVID-19 has made it more relevant than ever to bring learning outdoors during school reentry to help lower stress while engaging students in a setting that reduces the risk of transmission—similar to when students were brought outside to protect them against tuberculosis and the Spanish Flu at the beginning of the 20th Century.

The most effective outdoor learning is student-centered, culturally relevant and responsive, multidisciplinary, and supports physical, emotional, social, and spiritual health and wellbeing. This guidance document provides administrators, teachers, educators, and families with practical tools, resources, and practices to safely conduct learning outdoors.

There are several specific areas where outdoor and environmental education programs can help schools, students, teachers, and families. The following areas are expanded upon in these guidelines:

- Using School Grounds for Outdoor Learning
- Supporting Teachers in Outdoor Learning
- Supporting At-Home Outdoor Learning

There are many approaches to outdoor and environmental learning and education, including conservation, experiential, environmental, nature-based, and place-based education. School districts are encouraged to incorporate as many of these approaches as feasible.

DEFINITIONS

Outdoor learning, or outdoor education, refers to a broad, interdisciplinary set of activities that include discovery, experimentation, learning about and connecting to the outdoors and natural world, and engaging in environmental and recreational activities in an outdoor setting.

Environmental education is an interdisciplinary educational process that helps people learn more about individual and community connections to natural systems, fostering environmental literacy and civic engagement.

An **outdoor classroom** is an external shelter or space within the school grounds which creates a practical area for outdoor learning.



Using School Grounds for Outdoor Learning

Schools can consider their school grounds as an asset to help students maintain social distancing and to be in environments that are healthier for them socially, emotionally, physically, and academically. Schools can design, develop, and implement outdoor learning spaces with the involvement of students, families, educators, staff, and communities.

Conduct an inventory of the school grounds to identify outdoor learning areas—for instance, classrooms with a door to the outside where students can be inside or outside, and areas that are in the shade and have access to nearby bathrooms. Consider designating outdoor spaces for each cohort and marking boundaries to make sure that students stay in their cohort when outdoors.

Consider the following for these spaces:

- Shade and seating structures, such as shade cloths for shade and benches for seating. Engage the community, including students, teachers, and families in the design and development of these spaces.
- Professional learning opportunities for teachers to help transition to teaching outdoors while meeting the Common Core State Standards and NM STEM Ready! Science Standards.
- Allocating or seeking funding for experienced environmental and outdoor educators to assist with outdoor learning. Outdoor and environmental educators can be essential partners in using school grounds for expanded classroom capacity. They have expertise in group management and engagement in outdoor settings and are often specifically trained in addressing the physical health and safety of participants in an outdoor setting.
- “Get outside bags” for each elementary student. The bags could contain a half-size yoga mat, a whiteboard clipboard, dry erase markers, and other appropriate supplies.

Incorporating outdoor spaces for school learning requires careful consideration of these concerns:

- CDC, district, and state guidelines for students being outdoors and the use of outdoor materials or equipment
- Bathroom access
- Accommodations for students with special needs
- Lunch service
- WiFi access
- Scheduling for common areas
- Weather
- Allergic conditions
- Ease of materials movement

Supporting Teachers in Outdoor Learning

Adapting to outdoor learning requires supporting teachers in understanding how to utilize these spaces to enhance academic learning and support social emotional learning. Outdoor and environmental education programs in communities can be leveraged to provide support for instruction in outdoor spaces and additional learning opportunities that are aligned with academic standards.

Teachers can:

- Leverage the expertise of outdoor and environmental educators to provide engaging professional learning and increase their comfort and capacity in using outdoor classrooms and other learning spaces at or near the school (such as school gardens, greenhouses, and nearby green space) for meaningful instruction.
- Partner with program providers to design programs that are aligned with academic standards and gain access to existing lessons and other environmental education resources to use with classes to get students engaged with the natural world.
- Engage community-based educators to work with classroom teachers to support outdoor learning at school.

Supporting At-Home Outdoor Learning

Spending daily time outdoors can improve health and wellness, enhance social and emotional skills, improve academic performance, increase motivation and interest in school, and increase civic and community interest and engagement.

Parents/guardians and families can:

- Seek out community-based outdoor and environmental education partners for providing remote learning resources such as activities that can be completed at home or in the community.
- Incorporate provided lessons and activities for children to explore and investigate nature, either outdoors in a backyard, neighborhood, or park. For ideas, [please see the 35+ activities available in English and Spanish developed by New Mexican organizations](#).
- Engage the whole family and use time outdoors to focus on physical, emotional, social, and spiritual health and wellbeing through enjoyable outdoor activities.

Community-based outdoor and environmental education programs and sites also adhere 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.

Conclusion

These recommendations can help school districts, teachers, parents, and communities explore new ways of tackling these challenges and think about how and where students learn and what sorts of partnerships can best support a return to school that is not only safe but contributes to a vastly more healthy and meaningful education. We encourage you to take as much of your classroom curriculum outdoors as possible to gain maximum learning and health benefits for students and connect lessons to nature and the outdoors to foster student achievement and interest. Utilizing the outdoors for academic learning supports the whole student and enables them to thrive safely now and into the future.

RESOURCES

- [Outdoor Learning in New Mexico](#): A compilation of resources, support, and professional learning to support administrators, teachers, parents, and families, including how to connect with community-based organizations.
- [Shifting Towards Equity, Community Visioning for Outdoor and Environmental Learning During and Past COVID-19](#): A virtual summit held in July 2020 hosted by Environmental Education of New Mexico, Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education, and Maine Environmental Education Association for outdoor and environmental learning at home, in community, and at school for the 2020–2021 school year.
- [North American Association for Environmental Education](#): COVID-19 Resources, Tips, and Support, including outdoor activities for all grade levels (early childhood through higher education), virtual field trips, and professional development.
- [North American Association for Environmental Education](#): Guidance for Reopening Schools.
- [National COVID-19 Outdoor Learning Initiative](#): Outdoor classroom infrastructure, professional development, case studies, and policies.
- [NM MESA](#): STEM and Environmental Education Activities for New Mexico developed for at-home learning.
- [National Academy of Science](#): Teaching Science and Engineering during a Crisis.
- [Council of State Science Supervisors](#): Resources for family science learning.
- [Learning in Places](#): Outdoor learning for grades K–3.
- [New Mexico Public Education Department Professional Learning](#)

