



STATEWIDE OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS

DESIGN, BUILD, LEARN

Why Outdoor Classrooms?

Research shows when we support kids in daily outdoor experiences through outdoor classrooms, they are healthier and gain the knowledge, skills, and ongoing curiosity to innovate solutions to social and environmental problems.

The need for outdoor learning has never been more evident than during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Statewide support for outdoor classrooms is at an all-time high, as evidenced by Senate Memorial 1 (Sen. Correa Hemphill), passed with overwhelming bi-partisan support in the 2021 New Mexico State Legislative session.

By establishing outdoor classrooms on school grounds across New Mexico, we can support students in outdoor learning during the school day while providing outdoor spaces that families and communities can use outside of school hours to immediately address health and park inequities.

Benefits of Outdoor Classrooms¹:

- Improved physical, emotional, social, and spiritual health and wellbeing
- Increased connections with community
- Interest in civic action
- Academic skills including critical thinking and problem solving
- Enhanced academic achievement
- Motivation and increased enthusiasm

What are the Components?

DESIGN: Outdoor learning spaces can take many forms and can be tailored to fit the needs of each individual school and community. It is critical to include students, teachers, administrators, school staff, parents/guardians, and community members in the design of these spaces. Design should include plans for maintenance.

BUILD: Outdoor classrooms are a very low-cost solution (\$2,000-10,000 per school) to improving the quality of education in our state. New Mexico teachers have identified two main priorities in building outdoor classrooms: shade (through native plantings or shade sails) and seating.

LEARN: Teachers and staff need to be supported with training, and standards-aligned activities, and Outdoor Learning Coordinator assistance to incorporate evidence-based outdoor learning into their instruction.

How?

An **Outdoor Classroom at every New Mexico Public School**. Cost: one-time expenditure of \$7 million (877 schools at an average cost of \$8,000/school)

Outdoor Learning Coordinators spread throughout the state can greatly aid in the design, implementation, and use of outdoor classrooms. Cost: \$5 million annually (98 coordinators at \$50,000/coordinator to be housed at nonprofits, RECs, districts, etc. and Outdoor Learning Specialist at NMPED)

An **Outdoor Learning Micro-credentialing Program**: Use outdoor learning as a pilot for micro-credentialing, NM PED works with EENM on establishing content (e.g., standards-aligned outdoor learning, social and emotional learning in the outdoors, culturally responsive outdoor learning, risk management in the outdoors). Cost: \$200,000

¹Nicole M. Ardoin, Alison W. Bowers, Noelle Wyman Roth & Nicole Holthuis (2018) Environmental education and K-12 student outcomes: A review and analysis of research, The Journal of Environmental Education, 49:1, 1-17, DOI: [10.1080/00958964.2017.1366155](https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2017.1366155)

How has Environmental Education of NM (EENM) supported outdoor learning during COVID?

Environmental Education of NM (EENM) is the **only statewide organization** that advances advocacy, collaboration and leadership to ensure that every New Mexico child has **daily equitable access to the outdoors and environmental learning**. Annually, EENM supports a network of over **160 organizations serving 270,000+ New Mexican students** (preK-12th grade) including teachers, educators, parents, and unlikely allies in related fields like outdoor recreation, education, local food, conservation, and environmental justice.

Between March 2020 and April 2021, EENM hosted **over 30 online community events** to support educators, teachers, program managers, and parents to share their challenges and successes during the COVID crisis, including through the use of outdoor classrooms. These events included [community check-ins](#), professional development [workshops](#) to help teachers and educators adapt to distance learning, a tri-state virtual summit with our counterparts in Colorado and Maine on [Shifting Towards Equity: Community Visioning for Outdoor and Environmental Learning During and After COVID-19](#), [webinars](#) on outdoor learning, and other events.

In our continued efforts to center equity, inclusion, and justice, we raised awareness of the [Structural inequities of online learning](#) (released April 2020), including the inequitable access to reliable internet service for many New Mexican families. In response, we collaborated with over a dozen organizations on [STEM activities](#) that were distributed throughout the state through “grab and go” meals at schools in spring and summer 2020.

In fall 2020, along with our broad community, EENM drafted New Mexico’s state-wide [Outdoor Learning Guidance](#) that was adopted by the New Mexico Public Education Department as part of school reentry planning for this school year. We also launched the [outdoorlearningnm.org](#) website to provide resources and support for parents, families, teachers, and school administrators for outdoor learning and outdoor classrooms.

[Outdoorlearningnm.org](#) offers a new level of support includes a webinar series on outdoor learning for parents and teachers including the following topics:

- Social and Emotional Learning in the Outdoors
- Standards-aligned Outdoor Learning
- Cultural Responsiveness in Outdoor Learning.

Overall, the COVID-19 global pandemic exponentially increased interest in outdoor learning and EENM stepped up to meet the interest with transformational leadership, a community-centered focus, and systems thinking.

All of EENM’s work is in service of [Every Kid, Every Day, Every Way: A multi-year shared vision and strategy to provide daily equitable access to the outdoors and environmental learning](#) for all New Mexico kids, developed over three years with over 200 educators, teachers, youth, and other program providers across New Mexico. This shared vision and strategy, the first of its kind in the country, provides a framework for systemic change to support equitable daily access to the outdoors and environmental learning in New Mexico.

Using Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds to Support Outdoor Classrooms and Outdoor Learning

Background

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, overcome learning loss, and more.

Most recently, the **American Rescue Plan Act**, passed on March 11, 2021, provided \$122 billion in supplemental ESSER funding, known as the ESSER III fund.

- SEAs are required to reserve their allocations to carry out certain activities: 5% to address learning loss, 1% for afterschool activities, and 1% for summer learning programs.
- LEAs must reserve at least 20% of the funding they receive to address learning loss.
- Two-thirds of ESSER funds are immediately available to states, while remaining funds will be made available after states submit ESSER implementation plans.

ESSER Funds Allocated Under Each Relief Package

Legislation	Date Passed	Total Appropriation	PreK-12 Allocation (ESSER)	% Funds to LEAs	Deadline for Spending
CARES Act	March 2020	\$2.2 Trillion	\$13.5 Billion	90%	Dec. 30, 2021
Supplemental CARES Act	December 2020	\$900 Billion	54.3 Billion	90%	Sept. 30, 2022*
American Rescue Plan (ARP)	March 11, 2021	\$1.9 Trillion	\$122.0 Billion	87.5%	September 30, 2023*
Totals		\$5 Trillion	\$189.8 Billion		

*Under the Tydings Amendment, Section 412(B) of the General Education Provisions Act, 20 U.S.C. 1225(B), any funds not obligated at the end of the initial federal funding period shall remain available for an additional period of 12 months, giving LEAs another year to obligate funds from these packages.

Allocations by state can be found here: <https://www.ncsl.org/ncsl-in-dc/standing-committees/education/cares-act-elementary-and-secondary-school-emergency-relief-fund-tracker.aspx>

Allowable Uses of Funding

The relief packages and guidelines for ESSER funding allow LEAs maximum flexibility in directing money towards activities and efforts to create and sustain healthy learning environments, improve facilities, provide students and teachers with new tools, bolster academic enrichment, and support students' social-emotional learning. Notable eligible activities that provide an opening for outdoor and environmental education programs include:

- Implement COVID-19 prevention strategies to safely reopen schools and maximize in-person instruction and that align with public health guidance, including upgrading school facilities for healthy learning environments (this includes school grounds which could be used for **outdoor classrooms**)
- Address the impact of lost instructional time by supporting the implementation of evidence-based interventions like **outdoor learning** that respond to students' social, emotional, and academic needs
- Provide afterschool, or other out-of-school time, programs that address students' social, emotional, and academic needs
- Provide integrated student supports, including through the use of full-service community schools
- Any activities allowed under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended (ESEA)*

*Environmental and outdoor education and related teacher professional development are allowed under ESEA

“Educators can look for opportunities to get students outside to the extent practicable, including outdoor recess, periodic mask breaks, and learning time in nature. Some New York City schools have converted blacktop roofs normally reserved for physical activity into outdoor classroom spaces when the weather permits. Many schools in more temperate climates, like Arizona, have opened outdoor learning classroom spaces for use by all grade levels and all subject areas. Providing clean air quality in every school is a commitment that state and local agencies aggressively work to meet. It should also be a part of state and district cross-agency efforts to ensure that beyond the school doors, students and their families live in communities with clean air.” –[U.S. Department of Education COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 2](#)

Environmental and Outdoor Learning to Address Student Needs

Specific strategies for using ESSER funds to address student needs using outdoor and environmental learning include:

- Creating permanent and temporary **outdoor classrooms** and other schoolground improvements to provide safe, healthy, and engaging learning environments and improve access to nature for mental health and social emotional learning
- Staffing at the school or district level such as **outdoor learning coordinators** with expertise evidence-based best practices
- **Professional learning** for teachers and paraprofessionals in effective use of outdoor classrooms and green schoolyards for learning
- **Field experiences** for students during summer and out of school time to provide a well-rounded and enriching education
- **Green schools** programs, which emphasize healthy indoor and outdoor learning environments, and promote project-based learning



Photo by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Institute for EDUImages

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](#)

