



COURTESY PHOTO

Students learning in an outdoor classroom at Mountain Mahogany Community School in Albuquerque.

A healthier alternative

The benefits of students learning in outdoor classrooms go far beyond reducing risks of COVID

BY EILEEN EVERETT

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ENVIRONMENTAL
EDUCATION OF NEW MEXICO

AND SUE GEORGE

DIRECTOR, WILD FRIENDS, UNM SCHOOL
OF LAW

We at Environmental Education of New Mexico (EENM) and the Wild Friends program couldn't agree more with the words of outgoing Public Education Department Secretary Ryan Stewart about the need for outdoor classrooms (Journal Aug. 23). The necessity of outdoor learning has never been more evident, and outdoor classrooms provide a bipartisan, common-sense solution to support healthier kids, schools and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

EENM and Wild Friends partnered during the 2021 Legislative Session to support the successful bipartisan passage of Senate Memorial 1, sponsored by Sen. Siah Correa Hemphill, D-Silver City, in support of outdoor classrooms. Wild Friends students, through their award-winning civics education program at the UNM School of Law, drafted the memorial to create an Outdoor Classrooms Interagency Task Force, including the N.M. Public Education Department, to establish and expand outdoor classrooms across the state.

EENM offered expertise and support as the only statewide organization that advances advocacy, collaboration and leadership to ensure every New Mexico child has daily equitable access to the outdoors and environmental learning.

Investing in outdoor classrooms today will provide a healthier alternative to allow teaching and learning to occur in the open air, which reduces the transmission of COVID-19 for all of our students, teachers and local communities. Outdoor learning is an evidence-based approach directly in alignment with the New Mexico Public Education Department's vision, "Students in New Mexico are engaged in a culturally and linguistically responsive educational system that meets the social, emotional, and academic needs of ALL students." There are numerous documented benefits of outdoor learning including the following:

- Improved health and well-being
- Increased connections with community
- Interest in civic action
- Academic skills including critical thinking and problem solving
- Enhanced academic achievement
- Motivation and increased enthusiasm

Additionally, by establishing outdoor classrooms on school grounds across New Mexico, we can not only support students in outdoor learning during the school day but provide outdoor spaces that families and communities can use during non-school hours to immediately address the lack of access to parks and other open spaces in many neighborhoods around the state.

In fall 2020, along with our network of over 160 organizations serving 280,000-plus New Mexican students preK-12th grade, EENM drafted New Mexico's state-wide Outdoor Learning Guidance that was adopted by NMPED as part of school reentry planning. 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 and have kept this updated to continue to support the overwhelming interest we have received in outdoor learning during this time.

We at EENM and Wild Friends are ready to work with the NMPED to provide the experience and expertise to support successful outdoor classrooms and outdoor learning at scale. Learn more about how you can get involved by visiting eenm.org.