

# Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about STATEWIDE OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS: Design, Build, Learn

## **Why should New Mexico invest in outdoor classrooms at every school right now?**

Investing in outdoor classrooms today will provide a healthier alternative to allow teaching and learning to occur in the open air (proven to reduce the transmission of COVID-19) for all of our students, teachers, and local communities. Outdoor classrooms provide a common sense solution to support healthier kids, schools and communities, and there is bipartisan backing of outdoor classrooms in New Mexico as evidenced by the successful passage of Senate Memorial 1 in support of outdoor classrooms in the 2021 New Mexico Legislative Session.

Statements from health and education leaders also support this; the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have repeatedly stated that the open air of the outdoors reduces transmission of COVID-19. The 2021-2022 Back to School Guidance released by the New Mexico Public Education Department (NM PED) establishes that “masks are not required outdoors.” The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that masks are generally not required outdoors when physical distancing is implemented.

## **Will outdoor classrooms be beneficial after the COVID-19 pandemic?**

Absolutely! Outdoor learning is an evidence-based approach directly in alignment with NM PED’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,” and supports New Mexico’s Roadmap to Accelerated Learning and Renewal for the 2021-2022 school year.

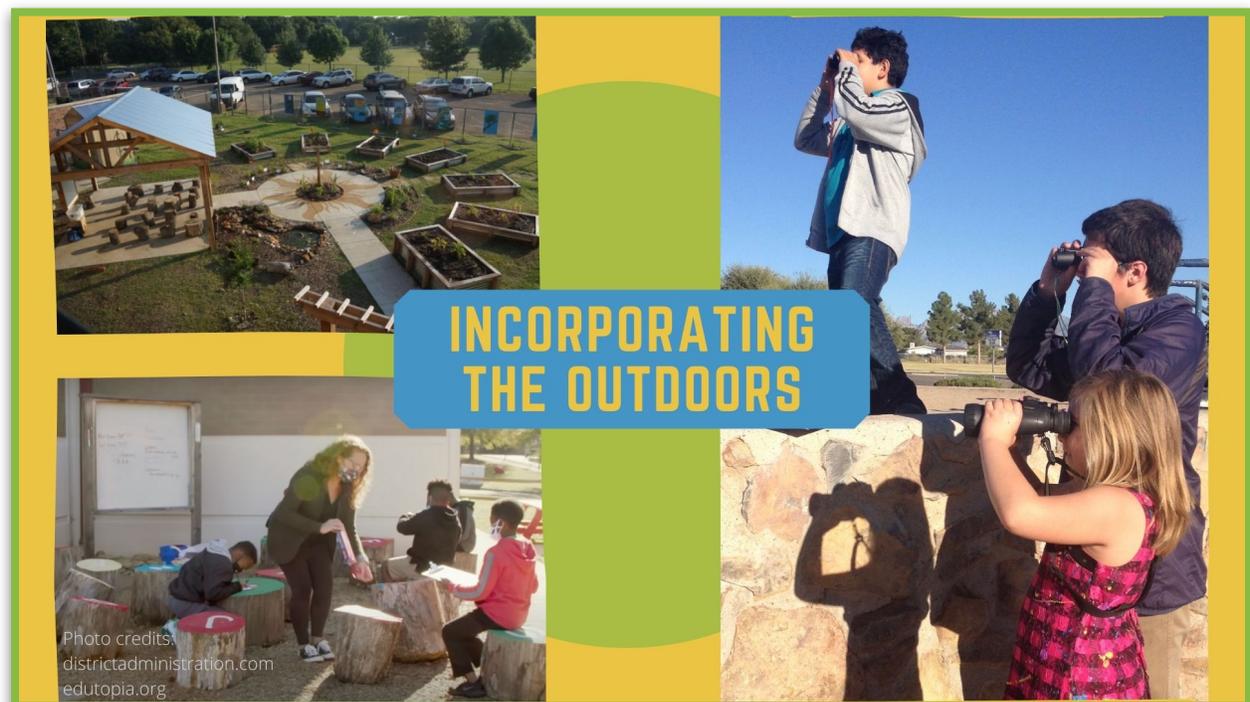
The Children & Nature Network and North American Association for Environmental Education co-host a [research library of hundreds of peer-reviewed articles](#) referencing the myriad benefits of outdoor classrooms and outdoor learning including the following:

- 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

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.

### **Are outdoor classrooms just tents set up outside?**

Not necessarily. Although outdoor classrooms can take the form of being set up in a temporary tent outdoors, outdoor classrooms can take many forms, from outdoor areas with permanent seating and shade to gardens to an open space with foldable camp chairs, depending upon school grounds and the needs of schools and local communities. Outdoor classrooms can be used for outdoor learning (using the surrounding environment in teaching) or learning outdoors (moving classrooms outside of school buildings), and virtually all subject areas can be taught in outdoor classrooms.



### **What should be included in outdoor classrooms?**

[New Mexico's Outdoor Learning Guidance](#) (released by EENM/NM PED in October 2020) offers a variety of ideas for developing outdoor classrooms like "get outside bags" and state, "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."

[New Mexico's Outdoor Learning Guidance](#) (released by EENM/NM PED in October 2020) suggests considering the following in design of outdoor spaces for school learning:

- 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

### **What about bad weather?**

New Mexico's Climate Center describes New Mexico as having "a mild, arid or semiarid, continental climate characterized by light precipitation totals and abundant sunshine" which contribute to "make New Mexico a mecca for outdoor recreation." In other words, the vast majority of school days in New Mexico have favorable conditions for outdoor learning. Local Education Agencies (LEAs) can use local recess requirements for weather as a starting place to develop guidelines for responding to local conditions.

### **Is there interest in outdoor classrooms and outdoor learning in New Mexico?**

Yes! In 2021, Environmental Education of New Mexico (EENM) along with partners USDA Forest Service-Southwestern Region and Arizona Association for Environmental Education released the **State of Outdoor and Environmental Learning (SOEL): A Landscape Analysis of Opportunities in the Southwest** ([eenm.org/soel/](https://eenm.org/soel/)) documenting 400+ outdoor and environmental learning programs serving over 280,000 New Mexico students.

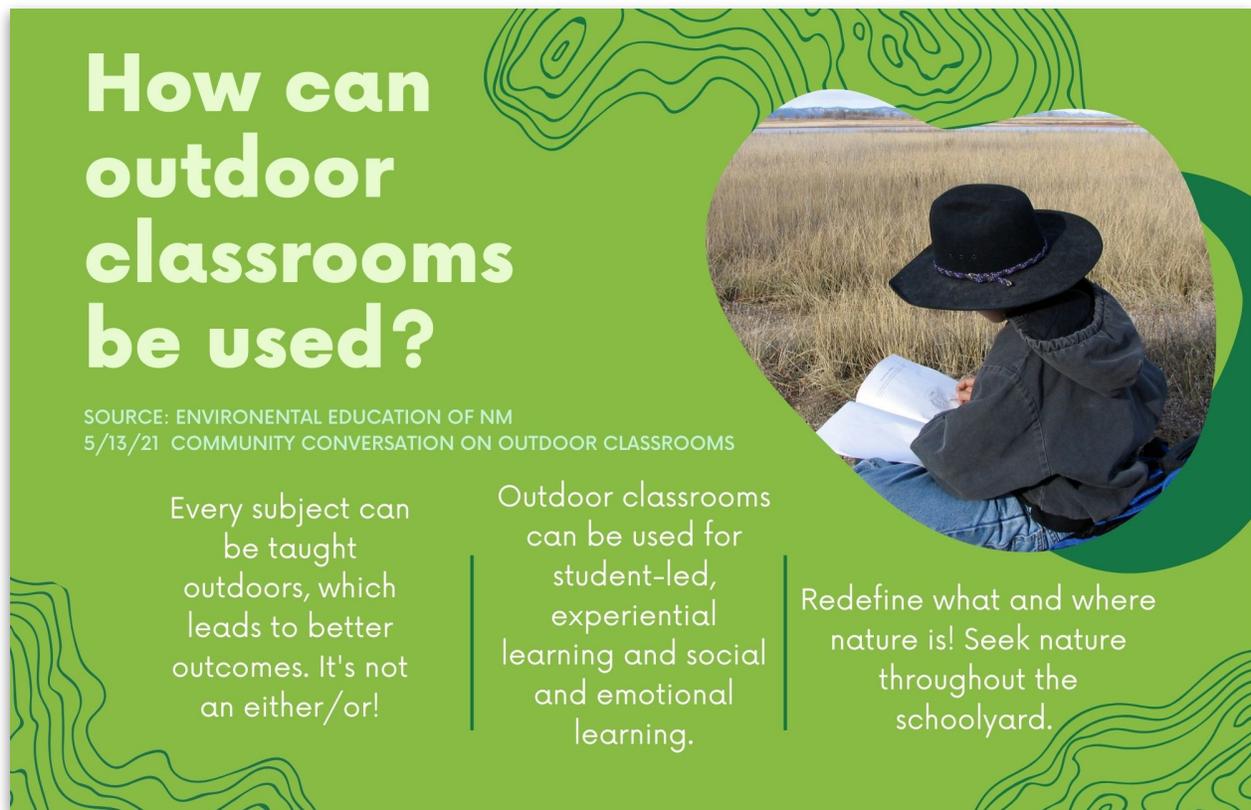
Additionally, through the Wild Friends program, students prioritized outdoor classrooms in the fall of 2020 and drafted and successfully advocated for Senate Memorial 1 in support of outdoor classrooms in spring 2021! Learn more about outdoor classrooms from Wild Friends students in [these videos](#).

### **What other statewide initiatives exist to support outdoor classrooms and outdoor learning?**

In 2021, Environmental Education of New Mexico released [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](#) after three years of community dialogues. 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.

[STATEWIDE OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS: Design, Build, Learn](#) incorporates three of the policy recommendations (outdoor classrooms, outdoor learning coordinators, and outdoor learning micro-credentialing) listed in *Every Kid, Every Day, Every Way* and identified by hundreds of teachers, educators, youth, and parents across the state.



**How can outdoor classrooms be used?**

SOURCE: ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION OF NM  
5/13/21 COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ON OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS

- Every subject can be taught outdoors, which leads to better outcomes. It's not an either/or!
- Outdoor classrooms can be used for student-led, experiential learning and social and emotional learning.
- Redefine what and where nature is! Seek nature throughout the schoolyard.

The infographic features a green background with white topographic map lines. A circular inset photo shows a child wearing a black hat and a grey jacket, sitting on the ground in a field of tall grass, reading a book. The text is in white and green fonts.

**What if I still have questions about outdoor classrooms and outdoor learning?**

1. Read [New Mexico's Outdoor Learning Guidance](#) released by EENM and NMPED in October 2020 and the associated [outdoorlearningnm.org](http://outdoorlearningnm.org) (hosted by EENM) that includes resources and support for parents, families, teachers, and school administrators for outdoor learning including outdoor classrooms.
2. Visit the [State of Outdoor and Environmental Learning \(SOEL\): A Landscape Analysis of Opportunities in the Southwest](#) at [eenm.org/soel/](http://eenm.org/soel/) to find local opportunities.

3. View EENM's [Introduction to Outdoor Learning at Home, in Communities, and at Schools Webinar Series](#) (Topics include Social and Emotional Learning in the Outdoors, Standards-aligned Outdoor Learning , Cultural Responsiveness in Outdoor Learning) on [outdoorlearningnm.org/intro-to-outdoor-learning](http://outdoorlearningnm.org/intro-to-outdoor-learning) .
4. Join one of EENM's [monthly community gatherings](http://eenm.org/every-kid-every-day-every-way/) (eenm.org/every-kid-every-day-every-way/) to connect with New Mexico's network of outdoor and environmental learning professionals.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### *for Realizing Outdoor Classrooms*

For successful implementation, provide critical expert support for teachers and schools through resourcing Outdoor Learning Coordinators

Integrate outdoor learning into education policies so that all New Mexico students have equitable access to the physical and mental health benefits



Source: Environmental Education of New Mexico, 5/13/21, Community Conversations