NM to celebrate its first week of outdoor learning

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New Mexico students will celebrate the state's first Outdoor Learning Week from Sept. 27 to Oct. 1. Teachers and students are encouraged to learn outside, and the Environmental Education of New Mexico group will host virtual events to teach about outdoor learning resources. (Courtesy of Environmental Education of New Mexico)

Starting Monday, students from Las Cruces to Taos will trade in their desks and whiteboards for class at nature preserves and farms as part of New Mexico's first Outdoor Learning Week.

Sen. Siah Correa Hemphill, a Silver City Democrat and school psychologist, sponsored the Senate memorial that asked state agencies to promote outdoor classrooms in schools.

"I consistently have found that students prefer to be outside," Correa Hemphill said. "They're calmer and happier when they're outside, and more at peace."

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham declared Sept. 27 to Oct. 1 Outdoor Learning Week.

Correa Hemphill said the upcoming week is an opportunity for school districts
to craft concrete plans for outdoor classrooms and curricula.

"Investing in those outdoor learning spaces will really help students academically, physically and mentally as we continue to deal with the pandemic," she said. "It opens up all kinds of hands-on learning."

Environmental Education of New Mexico will host a week of virtual events encouraging teachers and students to head outside.

Stephanie Haan-Amato, EENM’s communications and development director, said the group will also showcase local and state resources for educators, parents and students.

"So many wonderful 'aha' moments happen when kids learn outside," Haan-Amato said. "They learn about nature and want to preserve it. They also get academic benefits like more motivation and increased enthusiasm."

EENM will broadcast tours on Instagram Live of outdoor classrooms at Bel-Air Elementary School in Albuquerque and La Semilla Food Center in Anthony.

The state Public Education Department recommends outdoor learning to engage "students in a setting that reduces the risk of (virus) transmission" as students have returned to school following pandemic closures.

EENM wants the state to use about $12 million in federal pandemic relief funds, or about 1% of the money allocated for New Mexico education, to create outdoor classrooms at every public school and hire outdoor learning coordinators.

"With the community momentum and federal funding we have in place, we think New Mexico is incredibly well poised to realize this for every school," Haan-Amato said.

Theresa Davis is a Report for America corps member covering water and the environment for the Albuquerque Journal.

See schedule of activities
Visit eenm.org/week for a schedule of Outdoor Learning Week events.

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