

## MY VIEW EILEEN EVERETT AND SUE GEORGE

### Yes, New Mexico needs more outdoor classrooms

By Eileen Everett and Sue George  
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We at Environmental Education of New Mexico and the Wild Friends program couldn't agree more with the words of outgoing Education Secretary Ryan Stewart about the need for outdoor classrooms (Outgoing ed chief: Outdoor classes were needed," Aug. 21). The necessity of outdoor learning has never been more evident, and outdoor classrooms provide a bipartisan, commonsense solution to support healthier kids, schools and communities during the coronavirus pandemic.

Environmental Education of New Mexico and Wild Friends partnered during the 2021 legislative session to back the successful bipartisan passage of Senate Memorial 1 (sponsor Sen. Siah Correa Hemphill) in support of outdoor classrooms. Wild Friends students, through their award-winning civics education program at the University of New Mexico School of Law, drafted the memorial to create an Outdoor Classrooms Interagency Task Force (including the New Mexico Public Education Department) to establish and expand outdoor classrooms across the state. We 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 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 cannot only support students in outdoor learning during the school day but provide outdoor spaces that families and communities can use during nonschool 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 (pre-K to 12th grade), Environmental Education of New Mexico drafted New Mexico's statewide Outdoor Learning Guidance that was adopted by the Public Education Department as part of school reentry planning.

We also launched [outdoorlearningnm.org](http://outdoorlearningnm.org) 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 Environmental Education of New Mexico and Wild Friends are ready to work with the Public Education Department to provide the experience and expertise to support successful outdoor classrooms and outdoor learning at scale.

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*Eileen Everett is executive director for Environmental Education of New Mexico and Sue George is director of Wild Friends, the University of New Mexico School of Law. Learn more at [eenm.org](http://eenm.org).*