

Is outdoor learning here to stay?

By Jessica Pollard jpollard@sfnewmexican.com

Oct 24, 2021



Elena Chavez turns earth last week to prepare the soil in the garden at Monte del Sol for next year's crops during foundation class, which is designated for seventh graders and involves outdoor learning.

Photos by Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

It's a crisp, overcast morning at Monte del Sol Charter School and a class of seventh graders is huddled inside a new wooden structure, many of them fidgeting with notebooks.

The students are about to spend the morning plucking gourds from the school's community garden, tossing them in bins and shoveling around soil in preparation for winter crops. It's for a new class designed for seventh graders called "foundations."

Foundations teacher Kari Hagel, who also teaches science at Monte del Sol, said students are learning to set boundaries and get ready for high school after months of online learning.

"A lot of our kids are deprived of outdoor interaction. I think this was always here," Hagel said, gesturing at the garden. "But I think coming out of COVID and with high technology use, it's important for the kids to be integrated into their bodies."

Gardening is not new at Monte del Sol, a sustainability-focused state charter tucked away on Walking Rain Road.

But outdoor classrooms are — and the handful of new structures cost roughly \$5,000 apiece. Head learner Zoë Nelsen said the investment could help kids stay focused and alert through the school year, pandemic or no pandemic.

Some structures are outfitted with white boards and stacks of chairs, and Nelsen said the school is looking to add some tables. That way traditional classes like math and English can be outside as well.

Nelsen said the school used federal distance-learning grants to build the structures and carve pathways in the land around them.

Sen. Siah Correa Hemphill, D-Silver City, would like to see more of that.

In the most recent regular legislative session, the lawmaker sponsored a memorial declaring the week of Sept. 27 Outdoor Learning Week across New Mexico. Now, she wants to introduce a bill that would bring two state-level coordinators to the Public Education Department to help schools establish more outdoor time for students.

Correa Hemphill's son attends Aldo Leopold Charter School in Silver City. Its small size at fewer than 200 students makes hosting classrooms outside easier, Hemphill noted. But for bigger schools, when students have more varied needs, getting outside could pose more of a challenge and having state coordinators would help.

Correa Hemphill predicted getting those state positions and offering grants to schools for outdoor learning would likely cost around \$500,000.

“If we can provide that support right now when we have resources available, I think this is an opportunity to get things done,” Correa Hemphill said.

The New Mexico Public Education Department continues to encourage individual districts to put federal pandemic funds toward outdoor learning spaces.

Santa Fe Public Schools superintendent Hilario “Larry” Chavez said that parts of the district's funds will go toward individual schools to use as needed, and some schools may opt for more outdoor learning structures.

He said the district should take a “deep dive” in exploring outdoor learning possibilities.

Some funds from the upcoming general obligation bond measure, if approved, would also go toward outdoor classrooms.

Benefits of sending kids outside include “attentiveness, better memory recall and decreased stress and anxiety,” education department Deputy Secretary Gwen Perea Warniment said in a recent email.

Meanwhile, outdoor learning advocacy group Environmental Education New Mexico is asking for the state agency to allocate \$12 million in federal pandemic money toward the efforts — a request that Warniment did not address in her recent statement.

“That would bring outdoor learning spaces to every school and provide professional development,” said Stephanie Haan-Amato, spokeswoman for the organization. “So that educators can have standards aligned materials and have a comfort level with teaching those outdoors.”

Haan-Amato said there are two kinds of outside experiences: outdoor learning and learning outdoors. The first relies on a natural environment to guide a lesson, while the other might be a regular class taught outside.

Environmental Education New Mexico is an advocate for both, and Haan-Amato noted that not all learning spaces outside have to be formal structures.

“You really don’t need much,” she said. “However, it is nice to have some things in place permanently if resources are available ... because it does help.”

Correa Hemphill said she has heard concerns about keeping children safe, adding, “So there is a hesitation.”

Under state rules, students aren’t required to wear masks when outside, as studies have shown open air reduces the risk of COVID-19 spreading. There is a recommendation, but no rule, that unvaccinated people keep their masks on regardless.

Still, *Edweek* recently reported that shipping backlogs, fears of gun violence and students facing extreme temperatures without the proper clothing could hold back schools from investing more in outdoor learning, even as districts across the U.S. are flushed with federal pandemic funds.

Among the students in Hagel’s class one day last week, reviews were mixed.

Eleah Duran and her friend Amara Harachick, both 12, were dissecting a stray watermelon found growing in the garden corner. They said they loved the fresh air.

The pair attended Amy Biehl Community School before attending Monte del Sol and said having class outside was far less common in their elementary school days.

Duran said she didn't like being stuck in a classroom and would rather do any assignment outside.

Shayanne Montoya, 13, was less of a fan. Between shovelfuls of dirt, she said she didn't really like being outside in the cold.

"But I don't like it when it's hot," she added.

Parents are concerned about outdoor eating

As concerns over the delta variant of COVID-19 remain and young children remain ineligible for a vaccine, use of outdoor spaces in schools has continued. Some people, like Rosario Torres, are worried about the implications.

Torres, a long-time volunteer at César Chávez Community School, was one of a handful of people who expressed concern over an outdoor eating policy instituted at the school during school board meeting last week.

"[Parents] weren't given prior notice," Torres said.

Currently, the Public Education Department continues to recommend that students eat lunch outside as often as possible to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Torres said the problem arose several weeks ago when students at the school were directed to start eating their lunches under tent-structures outside when they'd spent most of the school year eating in.

"It was a very windy, cold, dusty day," she said in an interview. "That day it was announced kids were going to be eating outside."

Torres helps second graders at the school. She said her student haven't had any outdoor classes. She said that at this time of year, César Chávez seems ill-equipped for outdoor learning or eating.

"We don't have the infrastructure for that," she said. "Where is that money going to come from, and when will it be done?"

The school board and administrators are going to meet to discuss how schools should handle outdoor eating during winter Superintendent Hilario "Larry" Chavez said in an interview.

The district provided extra canopy tents for cover in response to parent complains at César Chávez.

"But that doesn't answer all of the questions," Chavez said.

Chavez said the decision on when students eat outside or not is up to individual schools and assistant superintendents.

Other people wrote into the school board Thursday night, and said when they complained to administrators about their kids eating outside, they were told to transfer them to the district's online school: Desert Sage Academy, if outdoor eating was an issue.