

EDUCATION

New to Las Cruces schools: Outdoor learning areas to be established at all schools by fall 2022

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LAS CRUCES - Students at Monte Vista Elementary School and eventually all 39 schools in the Las Cruces Public Schools district will have access to an outdoor learning area by fall of 2022.

The idea first began with Robbi Berry's fifth-grade class' involvement with Wild Friends.

During the 2020-21 school year, Berry's class testified to the state senate in support of outdoor classrooms. The memorial drafted by the students asked for a task force dedicated to looking into options for learning spaces in mainly pre-established outdoor areas. Legislators passed the memorial on Feb. 24, 2021.

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Wild Friends Program, a civics education program at the University of New Mexico School of Law that has been giving young students a chance to try their hand in drafting legislative documents on wildlife-based issues for the past 30 years.

This is Berry's third year being involved with Wild Friends.

Students in Berry's class made a request for an outdoor classroom to the district in September, and LCPS Superintendent Ralph Ramos decided to allocate \$10,000 to the project.

Oct. 20, Berry's students presented their creative ideas for outdoor learning centers to Ramos, New Mexico Public Education Department Deputy Secretary Gwen Perea Warniment and other LCPS administrators.

Funding an outdoor classroom

Berry said she was initially surprised at how easily funding was approved for the project.

Students suggested different price ranges, from \$1,000 to \$8,000, not aware that Ramos had already approved \$10,000 for the project. The fifth-graders thought of planting trees, making a community garden, installing an outdoor whiteboard and even suggested chairs that look like rocks for students to sit on and a tree stump for their teacher.

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After each student enthusiastically presented, Ramos announced that not only would Monte Vista receive \$10,000, but that he has set aside \$500,000 for outdoor classroom construction districtwide.

"It was because of you, that brought the idea to me that I said, 'I gotta do my job, I gotta find some dollars for these projects,'" Ramos said to the students on Wednesday, Oct. 20. "We're gonna try to use these ideas that you shared with me today and make it happen. I want to thank you for all your hard work."

There are about 11 other fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth-grade classes statewide working on similar outdoor classroom projects with the Wild Friends Program, but Monte Vista and LCPS are the first to get funding approved.

Although the students each prepared different projects, Monte Vista will likely combine ideas from many students to incorporate into the outdoor learning area.

Ramos said that LCPS has already made a substantial order to purchase furniture for outdoor learning last week, which is expected to arrive in three to six months. The furniture ordered is enough to establish outdoor learning areas in 15 to 20 schools, according to Ramos.

Monte Vista will be the first school to be set up for outdoor learning when furniture is set to start arriving in January.

“Some of (the furniture) actually kind of look like rocks as well, kind of like what the kids were talking about,” Ramos said.

Leaving a Legacy

The next step after furniture will be working with individual schools on where to create an outdoor learning space. At Monte Vista, there is already a shade structure that could be the final placement.

Ramos said that the district is working with school safety teams to determine the best spots.

The students were excited to be able to see and use the outdoor classrooms themselves, but they also talked about the legacy they want to leave behind to other students.

Several of the students raised their hands to indicate they have younger siblings.

“Even though you may get to use this outdoor classroom for a short time, it's going to be something that other boys and girls get to use for a long time, and that's really cool,” Deputy Superintendent for Teaching, Learning and Research Wendi Miller-Tomlinson said.

The students are excited to begin, they talked about the benefits of outdoor learning such as increased focus and opportunities to learn from their surrounding environment.

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