

Outdoor learning legislation a win for kids, communities

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During this legislative session, New Mexico’s leaders have a chance to make a crucial investment in our state’s children through Senate Bill 32, Outdoor Learning Program Funding, sponsored by Sen. Siah Correa Hemphill. Outdoor learning is a bipartisan, common-sense solution to support healthier kids, schools and communities during the pandemic and beyond. Teaching and learning in the open air reduces the transmission of COVID-19 and provides many other health and well-being benefits to our children.

Currently, there are no widespread systems in place for New Mexico’s more than 300,000 students to learn outdoors. Through SB 32, we could transform our current education system to take advantage of our wonderful climate and bring learning outdoors year-round by establishing an Outdoor Learning Program at the N.M. Public Education Department. This statewide program would provide teacher support and professional development in delivering outdoor instruction, high-quality lessons and other materials, and resources for the construction of outdoor classrooms on school grounds throughout the state.

Outdoor learning is a flexible, evidence-based strategy that educators can employ to conduct the same lesson they were planning to do indoors, or it can involve incorporating the local area to enhance student learning. When outdoor classrooms are available on campus, teachers can easily and efficiently capitalize on the many beautiful days of weather in the Land of Enchantment to get their students into the schoolyard to learn and experience the numerous

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health and academic benefits. There are also hundreds of programs located off-campus throughout New Mexico offered by organizations and state agencies to provide enriching and engaging experiences for kids in the great outdoors. The Outdoor Learning Program created by this bill will connect teachers with already established and new opportunities for outdoor learning.

In a 2018 study by Ardoin et al. from Stanford University, more than 2,000 publications were reviewed and 119 articles were analyzed for K-12 student outcomes over a 20-year period, and researchers discovered overwhelming evidence for the benefits of outdoor and environmental learning. Students who participate regularly experience: improved physical, emotional, social and spiritual health and well-being; improved academic skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving; enhanced academic achievement; increased motivation and enthusiasm to learn; and increased connections with their community.

To ensure all New Mexican kids can experience these benefits, Environmental Education of New Mexico brought together more than 200 individuals representing 90-plus groups across the state and 17 EENM Fellows to create a shared vision and strategy, the first of its kind in the country, titled “Every Kid, Every Day, Every Way.” This framework provides a pathway for systemic change to support equitable daily access to the outdoors and environmental learning for all students in the state. SB 32 is in direct response to the recommendations in this community-generated plan.

We are calling on our leaders to stand with our children and pass SB 32 in the upcoming legislative session. Our kids deserve healthier learning opportunities and stronger academic gains, and our communities deserve to experience reduced COVID-19 transmission too.

Sen. Siah Correa Hemphill has been an educator for over 28 years. Environmental Education of New Mexico is a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring that every New Mexican child has equitable access to environmental and outdoor learning. The Wild Friends Program is an experiential civics and science education program for New Mexico youth based at the UNM School of Law.

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