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New Mexico teachers, students to have spaces for outdoor learning

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Orfeus Prassinis and his classmates rake and prepare one of the gardens at Monte Del Sol on Oct. 19 for the winter.

Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

Outdoor education advocates hope a \$500,000 allocation from lawmakers will get more New Mexico students outside in the next school year.

The funding, part of the massive general appropriations bill the Legislature passed last month, will allow the state Public Education Department to fund a state-level position to oversee outdoor learning initiatives and also provide professional development and grants to school districts looking to get more equipment for open-air learning spaces.

The initiative behind the appropriation comes from Senate Bill 32, introduced by Sen. Siah Correa Hemphill, D-Silver City. The bill itself, which carved out specific amounts for spending on full-time positions and grant funds, didn't make it through the Legislature, but lawmakers folded the funding into the main budget bill.

"It was one of my top priorities, given the ongoing pandemic, that districts have the support that they needed to create outdoor learning spaces if they choose to," Correa Hemphill said.

Public Education Department spokeswoman Judy Robinson wrote in an email Monday the department has not decided how many people it will hire, though Correa Hemphill's bill suggested one "outdoor learning specialist" and an assistant. The funding won't be available until July.

Learning outside a school building, often on playgrounds or other campus areas, has taken on increased visibility during the coronavirus pandemic when indoor spaces at close quarters were considered vulnerable to the spread of COVID-19. Many schools took to conducting class outside, using whatever spaces they had available.

The new funding is set to support both outdoor learning, which relies on a natural environment to guide a lesson, and learning outdoors, which might involve a class like algebra being taught outside.

Because outdoor learning isn't coordinated at a state level, implementation varies from school to school and teacher to teacher, Santa Fe Public Schools sustainability program director Lisa Randall said.

Randall said she's particularly excited by the opportunities state funding will provide in helping teachers learn how to educate kids outside.

This year, the district is taking on a goal of building an outdoor classroom for each school at a cost of roughly \$20,000 from general obligation bond funds, she said. Those spaces can be used for anything from environmental-focused learning to subjects like English and math.

"We can build as many outdoor classrooms as we want, but if we don't support educators in how to take learning outside, and how to be comfortable and effective outside, they're not going to get utilized as we hope," Randall said.

She said the emphasis on air quality brought on by the pandemic increased the district's desire to expand outdoor learning spaces. Randall said the schools have plenty of playground space, but many weren't "really equipped for outdoor learning."

"I think we heard that loud and clear, that at Santa Fe Public Schools we need to make more spaces where kids can be outdoors, and learn outdoors," Randall said.

Carving out a statewide position to oversee outdoor learning initiatives is only a first step in getting more kids outside, said Environmental Education New Mexico spokeswoman Stephanie Haan-Amato.

The nonprofit organization hopes to see a statewide outdoor gear library for students and more developed curriculum for teachers to use while they're outside.

"We see a lot of engagement for students if they actually incorporate the natural environment," she said. "It's really nice if there's already curriculum developed."

Haan-Amato said outdoor learning programs are harder to come by in New Mexico's more rural areas, and often kids have a harder time accessing them where they do exist if they have working parents or transportation barriers.

She hopes the state funds will eliminate some of those inequities.

"There are so many evidence-based benefits for kids' health; physical and mental and spiritual health," Haan-Amato said. "This new program ... is a very important first step in realize equitable outdoor and environmental learning in New Mexico."

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