



MEDIA CONTACT: Judy Robinson
judy.robinson@state.nm.us
505-469-5496



April 22, 2022

Earth Day: PED to elevate outdoor learning options *2022 legislation funded new Outdoor Learning Initiative*

SANTA FE – By the time Earth Day 2023 rolls around, more New Mexico students will be spending time in outdoor classrooms with teachers prepared to use the natural environment as a teaching tool, the Public Education Department announced today, Earth Day 2022.

The expansion of outdoor learning will begin this summer, when the department uses a \$500,000 legislative appropriation to staff a new Outdoor Learning Program and fund grants to help schools develop or expand outdoor learning.

“Time spent outdoors reduces stress and promotes healthy lifestyles. This is true for everyone but especially for children,” said Public Education Secretary Kurt Steinhaus. “When we can combine outdoor time with hands-on learning, it’s a win-win for students academically, socially and emotionally.”

“The natural world provides a wonderful, rich learning environment that automatically allows students and teachers to apply knowledge in a meaningful way,” said Deputy Secretary Gwen Perea Warniment. “In this way, outdoor learning is not just about being outside – it’s about deeper learning.”

The goal is broader than building classrooms in a shady spot on school grounds, although the Outdoor Learning Program supports that, too. It includes giving teachers resources and activities that promote discovery, experimentation and connection to the natural world.

“Outdoor learning can be applicable for any content area,” said Shafiq Chaudhary, interim director of PED’s Math and Science Bureau, which is implementing the Outdoor Learning Program.

For example, math students can collect and analyze data on fallen leaves, go on a geometry scavenger hunt or use the Pythagorean theorem to study the length of shadows at different times of day. Younger kids can play “I Spy” to develop language skills while older students write poetry under a tree. Science students can learn and measure changes in the environment.

At Santo Domingo Elementary School in the Bernalillo Public Schools district, students are learning about the pueblo’s agricultural heritage in outdoor learning spaces, including a garden, greenhouse and chicken coop, with plans to add an amphitheater, classroom space and outdoor kitchen by the end of June.

“We’re really indigenizing our teaching spaces because learning for indigenous students didn’t happen within the four walls of a Western classroom,” said Lorilei Chavez, the school’s indigenous curriculum instructional coach. “We want to take indigenous students outside underneath the elements and connect them to this DNA of how we understand the world and the environment.”

The impetus for an Outdoor Learning Program began early in the pandemic with the Wild Friends Program, which provides hands-on learning about the democratic process to New Mexico students in grades 4-12. Students help draft legislation on a wildlife conservation issue and work to pass it in the New Mexico Legislature.

In fall 2020, the students voted to work on outdoor classrooms. They learned about the benefits and challenges of outdoor classrooms and created design prototypes for an outdoor classroom at their schools. They also helped draft Senate Memorial 1 encouraging the implementation of outdoor classrooms, and then testified (virtually) in support of the memorial during the 2021 legislative session.

The memorial, introduced by Sen. Siah Correa Hemphill, passed the Senate with overwhelming bipartisan support on Feb. 24, 2021, launching a multi-agency task force to study outdoor learning.

“Being outside offers many benefits to students and educators, including improved physical, emotional, social, and spiritual health and wellbeing; improved academic skills, including critical thinking and problem-solving; enhanced academic achievement; increased motivation and enthusiasm to learn; and increased connections with our communities,” Hemphill said. “With the ongoing pandemic, it’s more important than ever to invest in outdoor learning spaces

to take advantage of these benefits and to help ensure we can continue to educate students in the safest, healthiest environment.”

The task force met between June and October 2021, when it issued a report that recommended establishing an outdoor classroom program at the Public Education Department.

Senate Memorial 1 had widespread support from students and educators, including Environmental Education of New Mexico, a professional support network of more than 150 organizations serving more than 280,000 New Mexican children annually.

“The last couple of years, we’ve had incredible buy-in from legislators and state leaders,” said Stephanie Haan-Amato, the organization’s communications and development director. “It’s really rewarding to see everyone getting excited about outdoor learning.”

During the 2022 legislative session, Sen. Corea Hemphill, who sponsored Senate Memorial 1, introduced Senate Bill 32, which called for a \$500,000 appropriation to PED to establish the Outdoor Classroom Program. While that bill died in committee, the same amount was later attached to the General Appropriations Bill.

That funding will allow PED to hire two outdoor learning experts. Through a competitive process, the PED also will award outdoor learning grants by fall. Details are still being worked out, but grants will likely cover professional learning and curricular materials while construction of outdoor learning spaces would be considered a capital outlay project.

###

The New Mexico Public Education Department partners with educators, communities and families to ensure that all students are healthy, secure in their identity and holistically prepared for college, career and life. Currently, the NMPED serves more than 317,000 students in 187 districts and charter schools. Find an abundance of resources for administrators, educators, families and students at [New Mexico Public Education Department \(state.nm.us\)](https://state.nm.us) or follow the PED at [NMPublicEducationDepartment](https://www.facebook.com/NMPublicEducationDepartment) on Facebook and [@NMPED](https://twitter.com/NMPED) on Twitter.