

# New Mexico Kids!

## Family Magazine

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## Outdoor Class!

July 28, 2022

Outdoor Learning Set to Start In NM's Public Schools



By GWYNNE ANN UNRUH

New Mexico's students will soon be spending time in outdoor classrooms with teachers who are prepared to use the natural environment as a teaching tool.

Thanks to Environmental Education New Mexico (EENM), the Wild Friends Program and the 2022

legislation-funded Outdoor Learning Initiative, teachers can use the many days of great weather in the Land of Enchantment to get their students into the schoolyard to learn as soon as outdoor classrooms are available on campuses around the state.

SOL Forest School has been ahead of the curve in New Mexico with extracurricular outdoor learning since 2017, using the Cibola National Forest and the East Mountains as its classroom

"Giving children the opportunity to be outside learning and playing in the natural world is exactly what we need to grow future stewards of the earth.

We can't expect children to protect something that they don't know and they're not connected to," said Sally Stevens, founder of Sol Forest School

The Outdoor Learning Program Legislation, which was sponsored by state Senator Siah Correa Hemphill, was signed into law in March. The legislation creates two new positions at the New Mexico Public Education Department to support outdoor learning statewide. It also provides for professional development focused on outdoor education for teachers, as well as micro-grants for the construction of outdoor classrooms on school grounds

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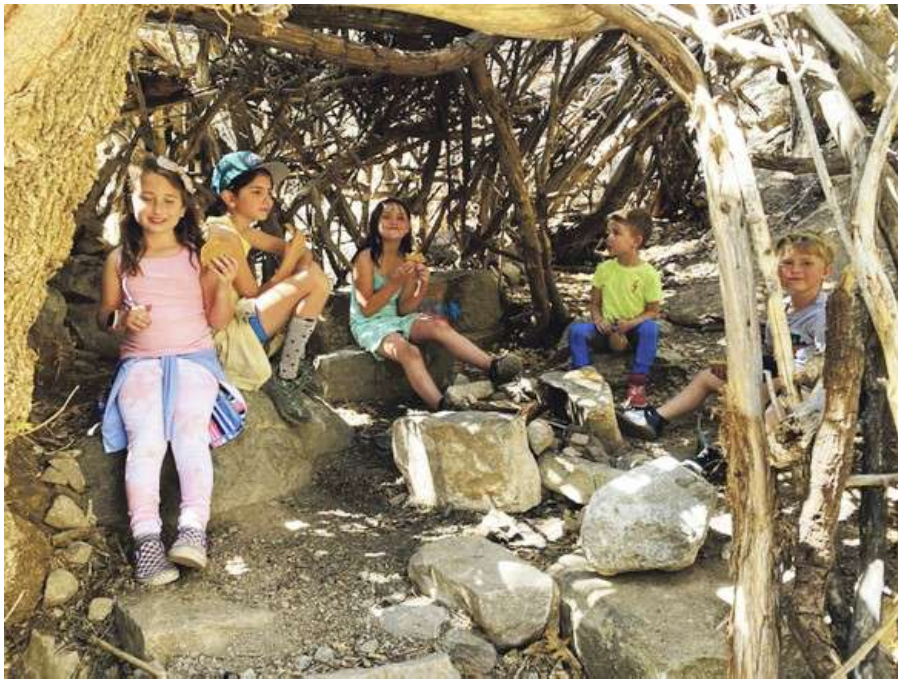
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throughout the state.



“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.” Outdoor learning involves a flexible, evidence-based strategy that educators can use to conduct the same lesson they were planning to do indoors when they incorporate the local area to enhance student learning. The statewide program will support delivery of outdoor instruction, high-quality lessons and other materials.

The development of the program will begin this summer when the department makes available a \$500,000 legislative appropriation to staff a new Outdoor Learning Program and fund grants to help schools.

“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 goal of the program is more than just building classrooms in a shady spot. 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.

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

An advertisement for Presbyterian care for every stage of childhood. It features a photograph of a young girl and a healthcare professional, both wearing face masks. The text reads: "Care for every stage of childhood." Below the photo, it says "Call (844) 505-PRES for an appointment." and includes the Presbyterian logo and the word "PRESBYTERIAN" in red.

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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, students are learning about Santa Domingo Pueblo's agricultural heritage in outdoor learning spaces that include a garden, a greenhouse and a chicken coop. The Pueblo planned to add an amphitheater, classroom space and an 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 Lorlei 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 pandemic highlighted the need to invest in outdoor learning spaces to help ensure that teachers can continue to educate students in safe, healthy environments.

The idea for an Outdoor Learning Program began early in the pandemic with the Wild Friends Program, a unique, award-winning civics education program at the University of New Mexico School of Law. Participants provide a statewide, experiential education program that integrates civics and wildlife law to help students in grades 4 to 12 understand the democratic process, develop good citizenship skills and contribute to wildlife conservation by involving them in public policy projects.

In fall, 2020, students in the Wild Friends Program voted to work on the concept of outdoor classrooms. They studied the benefits and challenges and created design prototypes for outdoor classrooms 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, which was also introduced by Correa Hemphill, passed the Senate with bipartisan support. It had support from students and educators, including EENM, a professional support network of more than 150 organizations serving more than 280,000 New Mexican children.

Then a multi-agency task force was formed to study outdoor learning, which did recommend establishing an outdoor classroom program.

"Being outside offers many benefits to students and educators, including 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 our communities," Correa Hemphill said.

"The last couple of years, we've had incredible buy-in from legislators and

state leaders,” said Stephanie Haan-Amato, EENM’s communications and development director. “It’s really rewarding to see everyone getting excited about outdoor learning.”

By the time Earth Day 2023 rolls around, more New Mexico students will be outside enjoying the grandeur of the Land of Enchantment as an awesome space for learning.

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