

Key Community Partners

Some key community groups are outlined below. This is not an exhaustive list, as nearly every school district will have specific internal communities unique to its local population. It is the responsibility of the project leads or school districts to assess who are the most impacted communities at the outset of pursuing outdoor learning, and throughout its creation and implementation. To the greatest extent possible, this should be data driven. These specifically identified communities must be included among the key partners, and specific outcomes (awareness + equity outcomes) should be identified for each of these groups.

For each community group, there are some rationales for why you should engage them, as well as some tips for and examples of how to do so.

For background on this approach, see the City of Oakland's [2030 Equitable Climate Action Plan](#) (pages 21 and 129–134) and companion [Racial Equity Impact Assessment and Implementation Guide](#).

Partner (Who)	Objective for Reaching Out to this Partner (What & Why)	Strategies (How)	Sample 'Elevator Pitches' or Messaging
Students	Outdoor learning is a new concept to your students, and students are a key group impacted by the decision, as they are some of the primary participants. By engaging them in the process, they can both gain comfort and feel a sense of ownership of their education.	Provide orientations and video demos that promote potential opportunities in outdoor teaching/learning, including safety trainings prior to beginning in-person education outdoors, so students are aware of expectations and can safely access educational programming.	<p>"We know this has been a transition for you. Having school outside could also be really fun!"</p> <p>"We'd like to hear your ideas about how to make outdoor learning work best for you and your classmates."</p>

Educators (Individuals and Unions)	<p>Educators are experts and key partners in education plans—indoors or out. Their input and buy-in must be gathered throughout all stages of the process—determining feasibility, planning for classroom design and material needs, and facilitating ongoing training—to ensure that teachers feel comfortable and empowered working in this new setting.</p>	<p>Provide possible classroom layouts and “materials kit” options for teachers to provide input on.</p> <p>Partner with environmental education groups to provide teacher training on outdoor education.</p> <p>Develop a working relationship with union leadership—use polls and surveys to ensure membership is engaged.</p> <p>Provide stipended leadership positions at each site to honor and recognize the expertise of teachers experienced in teaching outdoors.</p> <p>Provide information sessions with local health experts where teacher health concerns can be addressed.</p>	<p>“Distance learning exacerbated existing inequities and opportunity gaps in education, in addition to not being able to provide necessary and adequate social interactions for students. Research shows that COVID-19 transmission rates are much lower outdoors. Teaching outside permits in-person instruction and social opportunities. In an effort for school communities to operate in the safest way possible, we would like to work together to create outdoor learning opportunities for our students. You are the educational experts and we cannot do this without your knowledge and support.”</p>
Maintenance & Grounds Staff (Individuals & Unions)	<p>Maintenance and grounds staff play a fundamental role in the maintenance and upkeep of outdoor learning environments. Their input can provide invaluable insights into important details that might otherwise be overlooked.</p>	<p>Engage and develop allyship with school and district maintenance staff, as well as union leadership, by including them at the start of the process. They should have a representative on the task force.</p> <p>Provide information sessions with local health experts where</p>	<p>“We know that the outdoor grounds are the safest place for children and staff right now. Your expertise is required to design spaces that suit the vast needs of our community. We realize this may alter your duties and responsibilities, and we want to design fair and reasonable solutions.”</p>

		health concerns can be addressed.	
School Site Administration	School leaders hold the vision for the school, juggling the specific needs/vision of the site and the overarching vision of the district. They see the big picture and the multifaceted planning issues that need to be addressed.	Reach out to key leaders and express the need for their participation in developing an outdoor learning plan.	<p>“Distance learning exacerbated existing inequities and opportunity gaps in education, in addition to not being able to provide necessary and adequate social interactions for students. Returning to some in-person instruction is a priority, but there continue to be significant safety concerns about having staff and students return to school buildings indoors. Outdoor education is safest for all involved and has the added benefit of promoting health and well-being, issues of great concern as students and communities attempt to recover from this dramatic life disruption. Parents, teachers, and staff support this safer alternative for in-person instruction. We desire your leadership. Let’s do this together.”</p>

<p>School District Administration (including Curriculum & Instruction, Asst. Superintendent, Public Information Officer)</p>	<p>Administrators responsible for district-wide decisions about curriculum, safety, and messaging between the district and the public have a broad view of district-wide needs and priorities.</p>	<p>Infuse outdoor learning resources into presentations and staff training.</p> <p>Ensure the Public Information Officer is kept abreast of decisions and processes related to planning and implementation of outdoor learning so they can answer questions and relay information to the community at large.</p>	<p>“Families want children to be at school—safely. Providing some instruction outdoors is the safest and most cost-effective way to achieve this, as well as to address significant equity gaps that have grown during distance learning. We need your leadership to ensure alignment of outdoor education plans and district goals and mandates.”</p> <p>“As we embark on this new vision of what in-person instruction might look like, we’ll rely on the expertise of our Public Information Officer to communicate with our community and answer questions. We’ll work together to make sure you have the answers you need.”</p>
<p>City & County Officials</p>	<p>Forming strong relationships with city and county officials early in the process can reveal possible opportunities and ensure the plan follows important regulations and codes. Space constraints may necessitate partnerships that extend beyond the district’s walls. Counties often play a crucial role in developing health and safety standards and protocols.</p>	<p>Attend city council and board of supervisors meetings to share ideas. If possible, get outdoor learning on the agenda as an action point.</p>	<p>“Our city benefits from strong schools and children being at school. We want to find the safest ways to get the students in our community learning on-site. How can we partner to make this a reality?”</p>

<p>Groups that have been systematically excluded or are especially vulnerable (e.g., BIPOC, low SES, students and faculty who are medically fragile, students with special needs and SDC faculty, ESL families, first generation immigrants)</p>	<p>It is crucial to involve all community members in the engagement process, specifically those whose voices are often underrepresented in the important planning stages. Incorporating these voices ensures more equitable outcomes and thoughtful planning decisions.</p>	<p>Acknowledge and call on the expertise of these individuals as an assets-based approach throughout the planning process. Contact culturally and environmentally based orgs that have successfully served marginalized communities (e.g., Outdoor Afro, Nearby Neighbors, Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists) for instructional support.</p>	<p>“Many students and families want their children to be at school in-person, but we need to make sure they’re safe. Right now, outdoor classrooms are safer for both students and their teachers than indoor classrooms. Many students actually engage and learn better outside, so this could be a real win-win! We need your expertise to help develop plans that will consider your children’s needs and make sure everyone who wants to feels comfortable returning to school.”</p>
<p>Parents & Caregivers (directly and through PTA/PTO & family-oriented groups, e.g., scouts, FB groups and caregivers/parents, and early advocates)</p>	<p>Parents and caregivers are frontline partners who are trusting the system to maintain a healthy environment for their children. Some families may have concerns about disease, and others may not be comfortable having their children outdoors for a variety of reasons.</p>	<p>As the key intermediaries between parents and staff/administration, parent/teacher groups play a crucial role in building community support for outdoor learning. Engage with site PTA/PTO boards and other family-oriented groups, and attend meetings at school sites. Request a representative for the planning committee.</p>	<p>“We are looking for safe and creative solutions to get your children learning on-site—outdoors. The outdoors presents an excellent option to meet children’s educational needs in the safest way possible. We’d want to ensure parents are part of the process. Please join us.”</p>

Community-Based Partners and Outdoor Education Organizations	Many community organizations have long histories of supporting and providing outdoor learning experiences. Their long-standing expertise can serve as an important resource as districts attempt to reconfigure schools to suit outdoor settings.	Contact local organizations that already promote outdoor learning and nature connections.	“We understand that you were experts in outdoor learning before COVID. We would like to engage with you to learn best practices and strategies to make this successful for our district as we enter this new paradigm.”
Neighbors & Neighborhood Associations	Holding school outdoors impacts the surrounding neighborhoods with noise, possible street closures, and expanded campuses, creating possible conflict. Early collaboration can ensure a smoother planning and implementation process.	Attend neighborhood meetings, utilize online groups such as Nextdoor to share ideas, invite neighbors to meetings and the task force. Add a nearby neighbor to the planning group.	“We want to be at school safely. We understand that school won’t look like it used to and want to ensure we consider your needs as we develop possible scenarios.”
Potential funders (e.g., local businesses, corporations, foundations, philanthropists, local government agencies—water, waste, energy, transportation)	Keeping students in school in person and outdoors will address growing inequities for students and allow parents/caregivers to have confidence that their children are safe and that they have the ability to plan their work and childcare schedules. Schools and districts cannot afford to operate safely at scale without external support.	Listen to local businesses, government agencies, and corporations about their concerns with workers having access to childcare. Invite potential funders to district outdoor learning vision meetings and engage your district’s foundation to include program officers in this new ask on behalf of the district.	“We recognize that many of you are having difficulty bringing workers back to work due to childcare needs as students learn from home. We also know that growing inequities for students are a concern for you. You can be part of the solution by providing funds for our district to implement safe and healthy return-to-school plans utilizing outdoor learning. We will need your financial support to make this successful.”

Credits

Compiled and written in 2020 by volunteer members of the *Community Engagement Working Group*, as part of the *National COVID-19 Outdoor Learning Initiative*.

