

Working Document | Reopening Schools with Outdoor Learning

[Whatcom Coalition for Environmental Education](#), a program of [Whatcom Community Foundation](#)

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Introduction

School and community leaders, staff, and administration have been adaptive and tenacious in their efforts to support learners in recent months during this crisis. As schools in Washington State begin planning to [reopen safely](#), learning in school yards and neighborhood parks can be an effective tool. Outdoor educators can support outdoor learning, increasing the capacity of schools to educate students and follow social distancing guidelines and mitigating job loss in informal education. The State of California is exploring options for outdoor classrooms to create more space for kids to safely learn.^{1,2,3}

Washington State is uniquely suited to utilize school grounds and local parks for in-school instruction. Hands-on support from outdoor educators, training and virtual support for teachers adjusting their classroom spaces, and additional support from community donors and volunteers can aid Whatcom County districts in equitably integrating safe, outdoor education for students. Adapting traditional school models with added outdoor time for students and teachers supports recent [OSPI guidelines for reopening schools](#), which suggests enabling students to maintain six feet of distance, and “keep[ing] students outside more, as weather and space permits.” Further, the American Academy of Pediatrics identifies utilizing outdoor spaces as high priority strategies for school re-entry on par with wearing masks and spreading out desks.

Together, we can utilize school grounds and parks as a cost-effective method to implement required social distancing measures and support the mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing of all learners and staff. Working with district leaders and staff, outdoor educators can support this model through teacher training and workshops as well as in-person outdoor activities that complement in-classroom learning objectives. The Whatcom Coalition for Environmental Education aims to leverage the experience and expertise of outdoor and other informal educators in the community to support district leaders and teachers to safely and effectively achieve the OSPI guidelines.

Community Need and Opportunities

Equity

- COVID-19 has increased inequality in education, as we've seen disparities in access to online learning environments and academic progress. Providing a safe environment for every student to return to school is a tool to increase equity.
- In addition to the benefits of social distancing and increased ventilation outside, schools and partners must work to ensure every child feels safe and is equipped to safely participate in outdoor activities. This may include loaning free gear (jackets, boots, hats, etc.) as well as communicating with guardians about safety and comfort outdoors.

Health and Safety

- Providing simple outdoor spaces on school grounds and in parks to allow for outdoor rotations of students at each school can provide options for social distancing and reduce the burden on indoor spaces.
- Individuals may be experiencing stress and trauma associated with COVID-19. Natural outdoor areas can provide calming spaces to unwind and relax. Outdoor activities can also provide opportunities for students to practice social and emotional learning skills that can help with stress management such as: self reflection, communicating about emotions, and awareness practice.

Cost

- Costs to adapt building infrastructure may be beyond schools' budgets.
- "Outdoor learning spaces can run from \$5,000 to \$10,000 per classroom to set up, depending on what districts buy. They can range from a relatively bare bones set up with logs under a tree to canopies erected over lawns or asphalt, with benches and chairs for seating. Teachers will need white boards or blackboards and storage for their supplies. Districts can set up classrooms in already existing gardens, on lawns, or over asphalt on their property, Danks said." ([ED Week](#))
- Within Whatcom County, several outdoor education community organizations are eager to continue partnering with schools to support student learning outdoors. These existing partnerships can increase existing school capacity and maximize output per dollars donated or invested.

Economic Recovery and Jobs

- The Environmental and Sustainability Education programming workforce may be a resource for providing extra capacity to schools.
- A Lawrence Hall of Science, University of California at Berkeley³ report outlines the estimated and projected economic impact on the field due to COVID-19:
 - \$600M in lost revenue from 1,000 organizations
 - 30,000 employees laid off or furloughed from 1,000 organizations
 - 37% of CA organizations and 30% nationally unlikely to reopen
 - Over 1/3 of the outdoor education field (up to 65%) is likely to disappear, eroding a key component of the nation's education infrastructure

Funding

- Continuing to support and educate all students in the County will require creative funding mechanisms, increased collaboration, and maximized community support, as Washington State struggles with a budget deficit.
- Increased partnership and collaboration provides the opportunity to leverage the fundraising expertise and experience of community based organizations (CBOs¹) as well as connect donor bases to students in need.
- Explore collaborative funding across sectors.
- Corporate donations of gear or funding (Outdoor Retailers).
- Support state-wide advocacy efforts (e.g. CARES act).

Proposed Models for Accessible and Equitable Outdoor Learning

1. Teacher training and ongoing support for utilizing outdoor spaces (for either virtual or in-person instruction):

- Overview of model:
 - Support teachers with training and lesson plan development for integrating outdoor learning into the school year - this could work with an A/B model where half of the students are in school, expanding classroom learning to outdoor spaces to optimize for health and safety
 - Two options:
 - Teachers attend virtual and in-person trainings with ongoing support and are assigned an 'Outdoor Assistant' to support lesson development (out of the field)
 - Teachers attend virtual and in-person training and assigned an 'Outdoor Assistant' that supports in lesson development and outdoor instruction

¹ We are using a broad definition of Community Based Organizations (CBOs), including non-profits, tribal institutions, agencies and businesses supporting schools in Whatcom County.

- Other thoughts:
 - We could maximize the impact of the ClimeTime teacher training -- those who have gone through the training or go through it this year could become “outdoor ed leaders” within the school to support development of outdoor lesson planning and support for other teachers
- Draft scheduling/rotation thoughts [here](#)

2. Outdoor child care and support for virtual learning (assumes an A/B instructional model)

- Overview of model:
 - Assuming half the school is ‘On’ with traditional learning, this model involves CBO support for the other half of the school with activities, child care and digital learning
 - Full day of instructional support on-site at school to ensure access to child care, food, and digital learning
 - Morning : Outdoor activities supported by CBOs
 - Afternoon : Indoors (possibly optional?) staffed by CBOs and/or school staff and volunteers for students that need either child care and/or support with digital learning
 - Could incorporate learnings/practices from Vamos summer school project that has a similar schedule of outdoor activities + indoor learning
- Detailed proposal with suggested rotation schedule [here](#).

3. Community supported outdoor enrichment (assumes an A/B instructional model)

- Overview of model:
 - This model involves partnerships with CBOs to offer specials/enrichment (art, library, garden, physical education, etc.) to augment traditional learning OR for the half of the school that is not ‘On’ with traditional learning.
 - Rotations such as (outdoor ed can support each):
 - Outdoor education (supported by this collaborative)
 - Health and wellness—outside time for stress reduction, social emotional learning, etc. (supported by youth mentorship agencies, dispute resolution groups, ie. Animals as Natural Therapy etc.)
 - Stewardship—”adopt a park” model where kids do stewardship on site at school or nearby park (supported by parks and similar orgs)
 - Art & creativity—nature art and journaling (supported by arts-based orgs, e.g. Allie Arts, BellinghamArt)
 - Literacy/library/language arts—outside reading, journaling time (supported by literacy orgs, libraries, etc.)
- [Initial thoughts on rotations/needs here](#)

4. Enhancing remote virtual learning with learning outdoors

- Overview of model:

- This model involves partnerships with CBOs and municipalities to offer specials/enrichment (art, library, garden, physical education, etc.) to augment traditional remote learning OR teacher training to integrate learning outdoors along with virtual learning
- Support for homeschooled youth or those who are opting out of school (up to 20% of students by one district's estimate).
- (See Models 1 and 3)

Additional Possible Capacity and Support

Local coalitions and organizations:

- [Whatcom Coalition for Environmental Education](#)
- Collaboration with Parks and Recreation Departments to increase access to outdoor spaces, facilities, and shelters
- Western Washington Huxley College of the Environment
- Potential support from informal educators across Whatcom County (BAAY's EduArts program, Allied Arts)
- Whatcom Land Trust for walkable spaces in the County

Possible funding support:

- Bellingham Public Schools Foundation
- Whatcom Community Foundation
- Chuckanut Health Foundation
- CARES Act

State-wide organizations to possibly lend support and advice:

- Washington Outdoor School Consortium
- Pacific Education Institute
- E3 Washington

Related Outdoor Learning Projects to Support Schools

In conjunction with district leaders:

- Vamos Outdoors Project Summer Program with the Bellingham School District - one of the objectives is to establish best practices for youth programming going into the 20/21 school year.
 - District contact: Amy Carter
- Potential to utilize Gordon Carter site for outdoor learning
 - District contact: Jay Jordon
- Clime Time teacher training workshops with potential ongoing support
 - District contact: Bill Palmer

- CBO contacts: Priscilla Brotherton/RE Sources, Annitra Peck/NSEA, Jenna Deane/Common Threads Farm, Hannah Newell/Wild Whatcom

Whatcom County CBOs to support teachers:

- Common Threads school garden programming led by AmeriCorps Food Educators and support for teachers in utilizing school gardens for their own teaching. Collaboration with other ClimeTime partners to support teacher professional development.
- Wild Whatcom can provide in-person programming in Title 1 schools and Life Skills classrooms as years past through our EdVentures and SEED programs (these can be transitioned into lesson plans if virtual learning is occurring).
- RE Sources - Green Classroom program. We are looking to shift this programming to fit the needs of the students while meeting our org's and our funders missions.
- Garden of the Salish Sea Curriculum (GSSC) can provide in person and virtual programming for students, teachers and families in partnership with Friends of Birch Bay State Park and the City of Blaine parks department. Our flagship program at Blaine is for 5th grade and we have worked with Blaine 1st grade multigrade classrooms. We have a series of virtual field trips to Birch Bay State Park and Drayton Harbor. GSSC provides virtual teacher training partnered with the Northwest Educational Service District as part of the ClimeTime project.
- Animals as Natural Therapy can continue with BRIDGES youth at our farm (ages 10 to 18) as the number of youth allowed to gather is increased. We can also continue our Leadership Bully Awareness workshops at the farm and at some schools that have no transportation but do have space (Such as we have done for Blaine Middle school). We offer programs on social emotional learning as provided by animals, animal husbandry in the schools.
- City of Bellingham, Public Works will continue to offer Water School to 5th grade classes in the Bellingham Public Schools. Currently there is an [online version](#) of the lessons that teachers can distribute to students at home, as students return to school, Water School can resume in-class and outdoor programming; there may be a shift to a stormwater focus if the treatment plants continue to be closed to the public. If transportation is needed for field trips, Public Works will cover 100% of the cost.
- NSEA can provide in-person programming to fourth graders through our Students for Salmon Program. Additionally, we have created virtual field trips that we can utilize to support teachers in a virtual learning environment.

Key Questions

- What is the funding model?
- What staff resources and capacities are available from Environmental and Sustainability education organizations?
- What capacity can be expected from school districts? District holds the process for volunteer integration and access to the volunteer pool, but it is unclear how willing community members will be to support given potential health risks.

- How can we engage families?
- If transportation is involved, how will this be addressed?
- How can we access CARES funds, application process to state?

References and Resources

- ¹Martichoux, Alix. [What will it take to reopen schools in CA? Officials consider slashing class sizes, outdoor learning.](#) ABC7 News, 21 May 2020. Accessed 4 June 2020.
- ²Collins, M. A., Dorph, R., Foreman, J., Pande, A., Strang, C., & Young, A. (2020). [A field at risk: The impact of COVID-19 on environmental and outdoor science education: Policy brief.](#) Lawrence Hall of Science, University of California, Berkeley; California.
- ³Superville, Denisa. [Outdoor Classrooms in the Age of COVID-19: Pros and Cons.](#) Education Week, 1 June 2020. Accessed 4 June 2020.
- [Reopening Washington Schools 2020: District Planning Guide](#) (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction)
- [eeGuidance for Reopening Schools - Environmental and outdoor education: key to equitably reopening schools](#) (NAAEE)
- [Five Radical Ideas for Schooling for an Uncertain Fall and Beyond](#) (NPR)
- [Outdoor Classrooms in the Age of COVID-19 : Pros and Cons](#) (ED Week)
- [Washington Snapshot: The Impact of COVID-19 on Environmental and Outdoor Science Education](#) (Lawrence Hall of Science, University of California, Berkeley; California)
- [Why some Black and Latinx families lose access to nature during pandemic](#) (KCRW)
- [Outdoor Spaces are Essential Assets for School Districts' COVID-19 Response](#) (Green Schoolyards America)
- [COVID-19 Planning Considerations: Guidance for School Re-entry](#) (American Academy of Pediatrics)
- [What We Know About Your Chances of Catching the Virus Outdoors](#) (New York Times)
- [How Safe Are Outdoor Gatherings?](#) (New York Times)
- [Workbooks for Community-based Organizations and Informal Science Institutions](#) (NOISE Community Science Project / Cornell Lab of Ornithology / NSF)