Outdoor Learning and Play Considerations and Strategies for Faculty and Staff

Resources developed by San Mateo County Office of Education's (SMCOE)
Environmental Literacy and Sustainability Initiative (ELSI) • Designed in December 2020

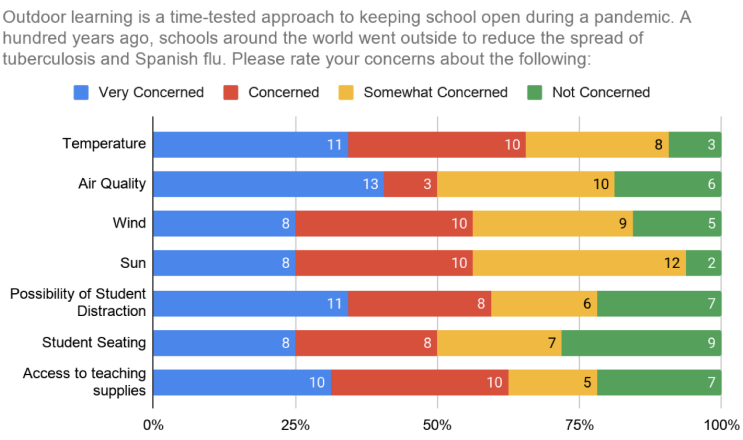
OVERVIEW



Leveraging outdoor spaces for learning and play is a cost-effective way to reduce the burden on indoor classrooms while providing fresh air, hands-on learning opportunities, and the health benefits associated with increased access to nature. Multiple studies show that learning outdoors reduces stress, improves moods, boosts concentration, and increases a child's engagement. In the COVID-19 context, being outdoors is a safer way to convene and gather groups for learning and play.

GETTING STARTED

Every individual is going to have differing needs and concerns when it comes to putting together a plan for how to take students outdoors (*see example needs assessment survey to the right - this was for a small CA Bay Area K-8 district with two schools TK-3 and 4-8. 32 faculty and staff were surveyed in Fall 2020*). These concerns generally correspond to an individual's comfort level with being outdoors; therefore, an important starting point for engaging with outdoor learning is to first consider one's own comfort and familiarity in the outdoors both personally and professionally as an educator.



Self-Identification for Outdoor comfort and familiarity: Please use the following questions and prompts as a framework of self identification.*

- How comfortable are you with going outdoors in your personal life?
- How comfortable are you leading other people outdoors?

MILD	MEDIUM	SPICY
		
• Personal: I don't spend a lot of time outdoors in my free time. • Professional: I never/rarely take students outdoors for learning and/or play.	• Personal: I spend a portion of my freetime doing exercise and recreational activities outdoors. • Professional: I sometimes take students outdoors, generally to lead students in traditional outdoor activities (PE, recess, or for garden time with another instructor)	• Personal: I feel extremely comfortable outdoors, and spend a large part of my free time outside for exercise and recreation. • Professional: I love taking students outdoors and take students outside regularly for learning and play.

**It is definitely possible that you find yourself somewhere between the boxes in this framework!*

CONSIDERATIONS AND STRATEGIES

Once one has self-identified their comfort in the outdoors, this identification can be used as a frame of reference for navigating the considerations and strategies in the next section.below. The ideas below have been developed with someone who identifies most frequently as “medium” above. If someone identifies more as “mild” in their approach, they may feel that they need a little more support, and if they are at the “spicy” level, they might feel like it is possible to stretch a bit further.

It should be noted that in San Mateo County, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, all of the following considerations and strategies need to be paired with the Pandemic Recovery Framework for Schools' Four Pillars.

CONSIDERATIONS AND STRATEGIES: Learning and playing in the outdoors does require some level of management, infrastructure and materials support in order to provide a safe and comfortable experience for students and staff. Some of these considerations and strategies you have control of as a teacher and some are decided by your principal and district administrators. Please use the following considerations as a high level overview, and visit SMCOE's Outdoor Learning Initiative page for more resources.	
Space	● Shade: Natural or Built (trees, tents, canopies, awnings, etc), time of day ● Surfaces to sit or write on: hay bales, wood, tables, carpet squares, towels ● Proximity to other classes for noise: may need to limit noisy active learning ● Traffic noise due to regularly scheduled deliveries, waste hauling, etc.
Weather	Our motto is taken from Swedish mother and author Linda Akeson McGurk, “There is No Such Things as Bad Weather, Only Bad Clothing.” Here is a calendar for thinking through outdoor learning conditions, and the below are some considerations for weather, including clothing: ● Sunny: sunscreen, sunglasses or hats to protect eyes, glare on screens ● Damp: move under cover, limit paper/tech use ● Wind: limit loose papers, direction of sound, may need to limit discussion ● Temperature: Layer clothing, fewer/thinner if active outdoors, more/thicker if not active ● Air Quality: Follow County guidance
Materials	● Limit the number of things students need to keep track of ● Provide containers for belongings and surfaces for tech and writing ● Individual whiteboards, or portable and magnetic whiteboards for the teacher can be used ● Teacher carryall, apron, cart ● Avoid taking lessons outdoors that require a significant amount of small manipulatives
Norms and Behavior	● Utilize and reinforce school-wide behavior expectations whenever possible (PBIS and other programs that might set learning norms and behaviors for areas of the school) ● Teach students to be aware of other classes who are using outdoor spaces ● Practice outdoor learning with low-stakes activities until students (and teachers) are more comfortable ● Establish and practice specifics for routines just as you would for indoor learning ○ Lining up, handling supplies, returning to class for forgotten items, bathroom use ○ Reinforce frequently until they become habit
Safety	● Be aware of your surroundings. ● Check with your site administrator about site specific concerns and procedures ● Plan for and practice the Big 5 Emergency Protocols when students are learning outdoors

EXAMPLE ACTIVITIES

Once you have considered space, weather, materials, behavior and safety, make a plan and go outside. Most students really enjoy learning and playing outdoors and don't need a reason, but faculty and staff will likely want to have a clear idea of *what* approach they are taking in the outdoors:

1) Learning and playing within the outdoors - meaning the focus is not on the environment, and the outdoors is just where the learning and play takes place.
2) Learning and playing from or with the outdoors - meaning the focus is about the environment, and the outdoors is a part of the lesson and play.

Either way, it can be a really powerful experience to be outdoors. Below are some suggestions that teachers could consider for different subject areas and community engagement time.

1) EXAMPLE ACTIVITIES FOR LEARNING AND PLAYING WITHIN THE OUTDOORS

The following list identifies different example activities that lend themselves well to taking place in the outdoors. If you are looking for more guidance on types of activities please reach out directly to the Environmental Literacy and Sustainability Initiative team at the San Mateo County Office of Education (elsi@smcoe.org). *If you would like some general support in subject area instruction, please contact SMCOE Subject Area Coordinators.*	
Calendar, Circle Time, SEL, or Community Time	These activities are often enhanced by being outdoors as it can provide a more intimate and dynamic space for students to be more vulnerable and engaged. Hand signals and total physical response can limit the need to write for interactions. Calendar and Community time that addresses seasons and time of day is also much easier outdoors. ● Morning meetings ● Show and tell ● SEL Activities ● Restorative justice
Centers and Stations	Some teachers use centers and stations as a regular part of the weekly curriculum. It can be fun to have these centers and stations outdoors and include skills and content relevant to the outdoors. It would be critical to think through centers that require few materials that would get lost in the outdoors.
ELA: Reading and Listening & Speaking	The key to teaching reading in the outdoors is to provide comfortable spaces for sitting and reading, and determining to what extent it is important for students to be near each other for listening and speaking, or to have more space for independent time for reading. ● Independent Reading Time (DEAR/SSR) ● Book Circles ● Read Aloud
ELA: Writing and Listening & Speaking	Similar to reading, comfort and ability to control materials (i.e. clipboard, paper, pencil) is critical for success in writing. Many students find that they are better able to focus on writing in the outdoors as it is not as static and constrained as an indoor classroom. ● Journaling ● Descriptive writing based on observations ● Independent/Workshop
Math	Math in the outdoors can be really fun and engaging, and also something kids can later incorporate into play: ● using the environment for counting, measurement, weight and volume (ex: which is heavier, which takes up more space)

	● Applied learning for geometry (shapes, sundials, etc.) ● Computation on whiteboards with real-world examples
Music	Music activities will likely depend on the amount of space provided and impact of noise level for other neighboring outdoor and indoor groups, but could include the following: ● Choral ● Some instruments
P.E./Movement	The majority of P.E./Movement activities tend to take place in the outdoors. As more subject areas share the outdoors, it would be important to consider space and noise.
Science	The outdoors is a great opportunity to reinforce critical competencies from the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), such as the Science & Engineering Practices and Cross Cutting Concepts. ● Observations and journaling ● Patterns, cause and effect, structure and function ● Seasons, plants and animals, weather, ecosystems ● Messy labs
Social Studies	Similar to other subjects requiring reading, writing, and discussion, social studies can be a great subject for outdoor learning provided you consider comfort and materials management. ● Mapping activities ● Personal and social responsibility for the environment
Tech	Using technology for learning can also be a part of outdoor time, but again, it is important to really consider for what purpose students are using devices outdoors. It will also be important to have a steady, firm surface for devices and managing glare from the sun. Some collaborative uses for tech in the outdoors can be the following: ● Photography ● Making videos ● Making podcasts ● Collaborative writing on google docs
Visual Art	Visual arts can be really great in the outdoors; however, it is critical to think through supplies and weather: ● Drawing with pen/pencil/crayon and paper ● Chalk drawing ● Watercolor painting ● Nature collaging

2) SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES FOR LEARNING AND PLAYING WITH AND FROM THE OUTDOORS:

- Education Outside Best Practices and Resources