

# Outdoor Learning

## QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

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## Why Outdoor Learning?

Photo: University of Maine  
Cooperative Extension 4-H  
Camp and Learning Centers

Outdoor Learning is simply the act of teaching and learning outside. Outdoor Learning in Maine can take place on school grounds or in local outdoor community spaces such as gardens, parks, nature centers, land trust properties, summer camps, and/or trails. [Outdoor learning has many benefits.](#) Students learning outside have [increased motivation](#) and [academic outcomes](#). The health benefits of outdoor learning include [increased mental and physical health](#). [Research estimates that COVID-19 is 20 times less likely to be transmitted outside](#), making outdoor learning even more important right now with the opportunity to provide increased ventilation and space for social distancing. Schools across Maine are exploring how to implement outdoor learning in the 2020-21 school year. Visit the [Children and Nature Network](#) and the [North American Association for Environmental Education](#) to explore research on the benefits of outdoor learning.



**Increased Motivation  
& Engagement**



**Improved Academic  
Performance**



**Limited Spread  
of COVID-19**



**Increased Mental  
& Physical Health**



**Environmental  
Consciousness**



**Fun for  
Everyone!**

Photos, left to right, top to bottom: 1) Maine Audubon, 2) Maine Audubon, 3) Maine Environmental Education Association (MEEA), 4) Maine Audubon, 5) MEEA, 6) University of Maine Cooperative Extension 4-H Camp and Learning Centers





## What Does Outdoor Learning in COVID-19 Look Like?

Outdoor Learning can range from educators teaching indoor content in an outdoor setting to integrating natural phenomena into the curriculum. Outdoor Learning spaces can be set up with tents for sunshades; desks, stumps, buckets, chairs or hay bales for socially distanced seating; and students using small white boards or clipboards while teachers use mobile large white boards outside. School yard shady areas can be equipped with hula hoops and small carpet squares to help maintain social distancing when completing reading, writing, or math activities. Outdoor learning can also go deeper, with teachers infusing what is happening in the natural world around them to teach core topics like math, science, art, and literacy outside. A school garden may be used for science and math exploration to engage students in building observation and analysis skills. Teachers can also be paired with environmental learning professionals from community organizations who can provide support and answer questions about designing outdoor lessons. Visit the [Nature Based Education Consortium](#) for more information on outdoor classrooms and tools to assess your school property for outdoor learning.



Photo: Friends of Cobbossee Watershed

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### Early Childhood Education Outside

Outdoor Learning can be incorporated at all ages and grade levels, but has an especially important role for young children. Early Childhood is well suited for outdoor learning because the curriculum is primarily play- and exploration-based, and the multi-sensory experiences are impactful. Outdoor spaces provide an ideal setting for natural [loose parts](#) and imaginative play, and foster the inquiry that is the basis of STEM education. Visit [Inside-Outside](#) and the [Natural Start Alliance](#) for ideas on how to incorporate outdoor learning into Early Childhood Education.



Photo: Maine Environmental Education Association





# How To Implement Outdoor Learning In Maine Schools

## SCHOOL STORIES OF OUTDOOR LEARNING

### RSU 89 - Katahdin Schools

Katahdin Schools have a culture of outdoor and nature-based learning that has been developing over the course of several years. Superintendent Marie Robinson came to the district in 2016 with a passion for learning in nature and has worked diligently to support teachers with the training and resources so they can experiment and experience outdoor learning for themselves. With the Katahdin Woods & Waters National Monument providing a backdrop and opportunities for engagement for students, what began with taking English classes outside for nature journaling, has expanded to include outdoor education electives in both middle and high school.

Excitement from a few teachers quickly expanded district-wide through partnerships with community-based programs like the Maine Forest Collaborative. Superintendent Robinson attributes the enthusiasm the district now has for learning outside to the approach the district has taken over time and the way outdoor learning has enabled both teachers and students to break down the traditional silos between subjects. Teachers work at their own pace, with the support they need, and invite their students into holistic learning that reflects the complexity and interconnectedness of life after school.

COVID has added urgency to RSU 89's outdoor learning efforts. The district is building two new pavilions with removable sides using CARES Act funding and teachers are ready to use them - 50% of teachers have reported feeling ready to teach outside this year - and elementary teachers will be teaching outdoors multiple days a week. While COVID has required some small changes from past years, teachers and students are now well-acclimated to outdoor learning and classes can be brought outside as long as the temperature is above freezing.

*...what began with taking English classes outside for nature journaling has expanded to include **outdoor education electives in both middle and high school.***



Photo: RSU #89 - Katahdin Schools





### Portland Public Schools

Photo: Maine Environmental Education Association

Outdoor and community-based learning have long been part of Portland Public Schools, but COVID-19 has underlined the challenge of scaling to meet the needs of 6500+ students in 18 schools. Both the school and local community have risen to the task, planning for a hybrid model that brings together teachers, local community organizations, and advocates to creatively maximize safer in-person learning for students. The Portland Society for Architecture’s members volunteered their time and expertise to visit each campus to assess and plan for outdoor classrooms. The district has dedicated CARES funding to make a minimum of two outdoor classrooms for each school with school grounds to accommodate it, with over 20 sites identified. After the initial proposal was announced, teachers, parents, and School Board members have stepped up to advocate for maximizing the outdoor spaces available. In response, Brooke Teller, former HS chemistry teacher and district STEM Coordinator/Science Coach, has become the district’s Outdoor Learning Coordinator.

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A group of district officials, teachers, and staff from local community organizations are planning greater integration and collaboration between schools and community organizations. They conducted a community inventory in Google MyMaps, mapping schools, public open spaces, and religious and community organizations that could provide space or support. While plans are still being developed, the district’s priority is to bring back younger students for as much in-person learning as possible. Piloting a community-based approach early in the fall, then expanding to serve more students as the kinks are worked out, these organizations will share the load for students pre-K through grade 5, then will shift to providing aftercare support on a shortened school day after the first month of school. The district has committed a significant amount of CARES funding to support community partnerships and to pay for coordination, and the Foundation for Portland Public Schools is also raising funds to support partnerships.



**PORTLAND  
PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS**

Teacher support is a key element of Portland’s outdoor learning efforts. Brooke Teller has been coordinating the planning group with community partners and has organized a peer support group for teachers experienced and new to teaching outdoors. The district is focused on preparing teachers with professional development and resources needed to support this expanded initiative and sees being outside more, pandemic or not, as a goal for the future.

Learn more and read more School Stories of Outdoor Learning on NBEC’s Outdoor Learning resource page.

**LEARN MORE**





## FAQs

### TRANSPORTATION



One scenario: split bus routes in half with two runs each morning and afternoon bringing half the students to a local community partner site, and half to the school. School dropoff at 8 a.m. and pick up at 2 p.m. Partner sites drop off at 9 a.m. and pick up at 3 p.m. Color code bus seats for each run with odd rows on the driver's side

used for the school run and even rows on the passenger side for the partner site run.

Additional vehicles (and drivers) available from the community partner can further reduce the transportation bottleneck. Family transportation or local walking or bicycle riding could further reduce the demands on bus capacity, depending on availability.

### WHAT ABOUT SUN, RAIN, AND SNOW?



As we say often in Maine, "There's no such thing as bad weather, only inadequate clothing." When cold weather is a safety concern, schools can gather extra donated boots and clothing and assign gear to individual students for the season so it is always on hand for outdoor learning. For early childhood centers, consider

purchasing classroom sets of waterproof suits that can cover the outer layer of clothing to protect students from getting wet. Community partners like thrift stores or community closets could support a whole school effort to help students be ready for inclement weather. Tents, yurts, and shelters can be used to protect students from both sun and rain, and some offer protection from the snow and cold as well. Creating a rotating warm up schedule and doing shorter blocks of time outside in winter are also options to keep outdoor learning incorporated into the daily schedule. FMI: Visit [NBEC's Outdoor Learning resources page](#) to learn about protective gear and outdoor classroom infrastructure.

SCHOOL	ENRICHMENT TOPIC - Example Week 1				
	Outdoor Ed (Monday)	Health & Wellness (Tuesday)	Stewardship (Wednesday)	Art & Creativity (Thursday)	Library (Friday)
Aldenwood	1	1	1	1	1
Birchwood	2	2	2	2	2
Carl Cozier	3	3	3	3	3
Coltonville	4	4	4	4	4
Cordata	5	5	5	5	5
Genova	6	6	6	6	6
Happy Valley	7	7	7	7	7
Lewell	8	8	8	8	8
Northern Height	9	9	9	9	9
Parkview	10	10	10	10	10
Roosevelt	11	11	11	11	11
Silver Beach	12	12	12	12	12
Sunnyland	13	13	13	13	13

## Sample Schedules

Planning for outdoor learning in a school day can take shape in a number of ways. For examples of formalized school schedules using outdoor space and community partners, visit [Green Schoolyards of America's Model School Plans](#) resource. Other schools have a more flexible approach: a group of teachers at Falmouth Schools have made their outdoor spaces into reservable rooms on Google Calendar, available to any class with advance notice.

For other schedule ideas, visit NBEC's [Outdoor Learning resource page](#).

**LEARN MORE**





## FAQs (continued)

### HOW CAN OUTDOOR LEARNING ADDRESS EQUITY ISSUES?



Outdoor learning can be as diverse as Maine’s student body. Partnering with local organizations that have deep experience serving the community that makes up the student body can tailor outdoor learning to meet the needs of the cultural experiences of all students. [Outdoor learning can also support successful learning for youth who may struggle with the traditional classroom.](#) All schools in Maine can successfully implement outdoor learning, especially if collaborating with community partners, for additional outdoor space, curriculum, or safety support. Contact the [Nature Based Education Consortium](#) or the [Maine Environmental Education Association](#) for assistance in connecting with community partners.

### HOW CAN I PAY FOR OUTDOOR LEARNING AT MY SCHOOL?



CARES Act funding to schools is intended for COVID-related needs - and learning outdoors reduces transmission risk, so some schools are using CARES to pay for larger outdoor classroom infrastructure needs. There are also numerous grants available to teachers from Maine-based and national foundations and agencies that fund small and large projects.

Of course, every school’s greatest resource is its community. Many educators have been able to build outdoor classrooms, easels, picnic tables, benches, school gardens and more on a shoestring by reaching out to local businesses and school families for materials and construction. This fall, many community members are looking for ways to contribute and support their local schools and are eager to respond to requests for support.

*Partnering with local organizations that have deep experience serving the community that makes up the student body can **tailor outdoor learning to meet the needs of the cultural experiences of all students.***



Photo: Maine Audubon

Visit NBEC's Outdoor Learning resource page for more details on funding outdoor learning.

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## Pathways to Action

### TEACHER TRAINING

Maine has many community organizations who provide professional staff development to build confidence with teaching outside. The [Maine Environmental Education Association](#) and the [Nature Based Education Consortium](#) can connect your school with existing or new training to support your staff.

### CONNECTING AND COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITY PARTNERS

As you are adopting and expanding the use of outdoor learning in your schools, you are not in this alone. There are experienced community partners ready and eager to help in addition to online forums for teachers and administrators to share and learn from each others' experiences and approaches.

A community assessment of local potential partner organizations and outdoor spaces is a useful planning tool and can serve as the foundation of future coordination. Options exist to expand partnerships with existing community programs to allow more students to have safe, in-person instruction more days of the week. Community organizations that previously hosted field-trip visits are pivoting to provide longer duration opportunities, instruction on school grounds, or hosting or staffing afterschool programming.

Some regions have leaned on local networks to plan outdoor learning for this fall. For example, Lincoln County school health professionals have been hosting forums, informational sessions, and providing other planning support for outdoor learning. Similarly, a wide range of local community organizations

in Portland have helped to plan for new community supports for schools this fall. Thinking outside our local geography or across sectors can magnify our local resources, knowledge, and experience.

Read more about Maine school districts' plans to collaborate with community organizations this fall in School Stories of Outdoor Learning on NBEC's Outdoor Learning resource page.

### USING YOUR SCHOOL GROUNDS FOR LEARNING

The school grounds can be an ideal setting for outdoor learning. When building outdoor learning plans schools may want to start with an [assessment of the property](#). Adding [outdoor classrooms](#) will benefit schools during COVID-19 and in the future. Outdoor classrooms can range from very simple and cost effective, like stumps or small benches to more permanent built structures like yurts or pavilions. [Follow this link to access a cost estimator tool for outdoor classroom construction and other design information.](#)



Photo: Maine Audubon

