



OUTDOOR SPACES ARE ESSENTIAL ASSETS FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS' COVID-19 RESPONSE ACROSS THE USA

A PROPOSAL TO ENGAGE SCHOOL GROUNDS AND PARKS AS STRATEGIC, COST-EFFECTIVE TOOLS FOR IMPROVING ACADEMIC, MENTAL, AND PHYSICAL WELLBEING AS SCHOOLS REOPEN

School districts across the United States can use their school grounds and local parks as safe outdoor learning environments to increase their capacity and options for social distancing as students return to school. Outdoor spaces will reduce the burden on indoor classrooms while providing fresh air, hands-on learning opportunities, and the health benefits associated with increased access to nature.

BACKGROUND

Schools across the United States will use distance learning through the end of this school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although it is not clear what the next semester will look like, there is an urgent need to reimagine PreK-12 schools in order to safely reopen school campuses.

Since social distancing will be required far into the future, pending adequate testing and a widely available vaccine, students must spread out beyond the traditional four walls of the classroom. While staggering students' schedules and continuing distance learning will likely be elements of the new normal, these options place additional stress on caregivers' capacity to work and may not be enough by themselves. Many school buildings were already at capacity before this crisis, and the costs to adapt building infrastructure to accommodate COVID-19 safety measures are also well beyond schools' budgets.

Expanding the classroom into outdoor spaces both on and off school grounds will address academic, health, and economic needs. Studies show that spending time outdoors is critical to student academic, physical, and mental wellbeing. Outdoor environments typically have better air quality than indoor spaces, and "environmental conditions, such as wind and sunlight, may reduce the amount of virus present on a surface and the length of time the virus can stay viable."¹ Outdoor classrooms are one of the most cost effective ways to increase school capacity. If schools are able to safely accommodate more children by going outside, there will be less disruption in the lives of students and families.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

The following conditions are threatened by COVID-19 and can be addressed by using outdoor spaces:

Equity. This health crisis is exacerbating existing inequalities across America. There are vast disparities in students' access to online learning, adequate food, stable housing, medical care, and access to nature.

Learning. Despite best efforts by school districts to provide distance learning, students are experiencing significant academic disruptions and loss.

Mental Health. This crisis is causing substantial adverse experiences for children and adults. Students will return to school with a mental health burden caused by social isolation, uncertainty, trauma, and stress.

Physical Health. Most children and youth are spending their time indoors on electronic devices. It is likely that many will return to school at a reduced fitness level. Some may also have suffered from COVID-19.

Economic Health. Our country's economic strength and security are threatened when much of the workforce stays home and businesses close. Many school and childcare programs that allow parents to return to work are closed.

Education Workforce. The nonformal education sector is facing large scale job loss. If these skilled, professional outdoor educators, naturalists, and museum staff leave the field, schools will lose vital academic program partners.

VISION

Engage school grounds and parks as strategic, cost-effective tools for improving academic, mental, and physical wellbeing as schools reopen with required social distancing measures in place.

Use and Expand Outdoor Learning Opportunities.

Provide simple outdoor classroom spaces on school grounds and in local parks to accommodate a portion (10%–50%) of the students or classes at each school. Use these outdoor environments to provide options for social distancing and take the burden off of indoor spaces.

Related infrastructure needs will include:

- Basic seating — log rounds, straw bales, picnic tables
- Outdoor teaching supplies — clip boards, white boards
- Shade — tree canopy, shade umbrellas, tents
- Storage — supply sheds
- Accessibility — ADA-compliant paths and bathrooms

Other needs:

- Professional development— help teachers and aides to increase comfort teaching outside
- Temporary personnel — to achieve smaller groupings of students, include nonformal educators via partner organizations, out-of-work due to COVID-19
- Labor — to create outdoor learning spaces
- Transportation — to ensure equity for schools that do not have outdoor space onsite or nearby



Outdoor Spaces are Therapeutic. Students and staff may return to school with stress and trauma associated with isolation, uncertainty, and illness. To ease the burden, nature-rich outdoor areas identified and developed on or near each campus can provide quiet, reflective spaces to unwind and relax.



Collaborate to Rethink Physical Activity. Many PE and recess activities require physical proximity and shared equipment. They will need to be reconfigured to accommodate social distancing guidelines, including moving from indoor gyms and crowded blacktop to nontraditional outdoor spaces, on and off campus. Social distancing during physical activity could be improved by:

- Limiting the number of children playing together, and assigning students to consistent cohorts
- Engaging smaller groups of children in nontraditional activities to develop strength, balance, and other skills without play structures or shared equipment
- Increasing gardening and creative activities with natural materials (e.g. art projects, imaginative play)

Collaborate with Before and After School Programs.

Many families need before and after school childcare programs to be able to go to work. These programs will also require new social distancing measures. To address this issue, they could expand their footprint to use additional outdoor spaces on campus and in nearby parks. They will also likely need additional staff.

ACT NOW

This pandemic has completely changed how people interact with one another and the surrounding environment. As communities emerge from shelter-in-place, nature-rich outdoor spaces on school grounds and in local parks present a cost-effective opportunity to improve health, heal our collective trauma, and support students, families, and the economy.

CONTACT

Sharon Danks, MLA-MCP
CEO, Green Schoolyards America
sharon@greenschoolyards.org