

Agnes Gray Elementary Builds Resilience Through Outdoor Education



Key findings from ICF's external evaluation of RREV.

Background

In June 2020, the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) was awarded a \$16.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Rethink K-12 Education Models program to implement the Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) program. The overarching purpose of RREV is to promote innovation in Maine schools so that all students across the state have access to high-quality and responsive learning opportunities. In August 2021, Agnes Gray Elementary School received a RREV award to develop and implement *Teaching Outside: The Box*, which began in the 2021-22 school year. MDOE engaged an outside research firm, ICF, to conduct an evaluation of the RREV program, including implementation of this learning model at Agnes Gray.



Image: An outdoor learning space at Agnes Gray

What Makes this Learning Model Innovative?

- **Outdoor learning facilities and grounds used to their full potential**
- **Whole-school strategy that goes beyond classroom-level programs**
- **Community assets engaged**
- **Responsive to trauma-impacted students**

About Agnes Gray's Innovative Learning Model

Teaching Outside: The Box is a holistic strategy to integrate outdoor learning across schools within the district. This learning model consists of two complementary components that allow for an expanded, project-based curriculum for outdoor education at Agnes Gray:

1. A full-time Outdoor Learning Coordinator (OLC) was hired to support the adaptation of the current prekindergarten through sixth grade curricula to outdoor lesson formats. The OLC works directly with teachers in the planning, facilitation, and assessment of outdoor lessons.
2. Physical infrastructure for outdoor classes was designed and developed, including pavilions and cabins on school grounds. RREV funding also supports construction of a yurt to allow for outdoor classes and activities throughout the school year—even during inclement weather.

Promising Findings

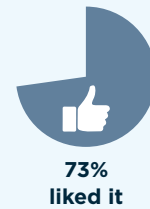
ICF's evaluation of RREV revealed several exciting insights about *Teaching Outside: The Box*. These include:

- **Teachers credit the program with enhancing students' emotional wellness and resilience.**

Teachers described transformative effects of outdoor learning, especially among students who have experienced trauma. During interviews, teachers reported greater student engagement and fewer behavioral disruptions during outdoor lessons. For example, one teacher observed that when struggling students go outside "The world makes sense to them (and) it doesn't feel like school," and they become more engaged and excited about learning. Students reinforced this observation, including one student who told ICF researchers that **"the fresh air helps me think."**

- **Students and families reported positive experiences.**

Seventy-eight percent of students agreed that they were glad they participated in the program, and 73 percent agreed that they liked their experience overall; 88 percent of families said that they would recommend this program to other families.



Future Plans

Agnes Gray is excited to be entering its second year of implementing this innovative learning model! Here are some things Agnes Gray has planned to ensure the long-term success of *Teaching Outside: The Box*.

- **Program expansion.** During the 2022-23 school year, the Outdoor Learning Coordinator will begin traveling to other schools within the district to build teacher capacity for facilitating outdoor learning.
- **Yurt construction.** Construction of the yurt is set to be completed in the 2022-23 school year.



Image: Agnes Gray's "hammock grove," where students practice reading