

Background and Purpose

This document is intended for school leaders, teachers, and others interested in developing and implementing an Outdoor Education program for their local context. It summarizes lessons learned from the design and implementation of 24 schools implementing Outdoor Education pilots.¹ Each of these pilots was responsive to the school's specific needs, but they shared some common features, including:

- **Expanding Opportunities for Students to Learn Outside Traditional Classrooms** – Many pilots set aside specific times when classes go outside to learn, and often leverage the woods, streams, lakes, or coastline on or near school property. Many pilots have built new outdoor learning spaces, such as yurts and trails, where students can learn, while others embark on more frequent field trips to places and partners with outdoor learning opportunities.
- **Developing Teacher Capacity in Outdoor and Project-Based Learning** – Pilots included activities to foster teacher capacity to facilitate the integration of outdoor learning activities into state curriculum requirements through professional development, coaching, and the creation of resources or modules teachers could use to teach students outside.
- **Emphasizing Community Partnerships and Involving Local Stakeholders** – Multiple pilots worked to forge and maintain connections with community organizations that promoted additional field trips and continued support for growing outdoor learning activities.

“This type of experiential learning is more relevant, meaningful, and memorable than traditional by-the-book learning. The things my students learn outside tend to be things they remember and understand more deeply”

– Teacher, MSAD 17

Key Takeaways from Outdoor Education Pilots

The tips below are intended to give school leaders ideas to consider when developing an Outdoor Education program for their own school. These key takeaways are based on an external evaluation of the Outdoor Education pilots supported by the Maine Department of Education's Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) program, and can be adapted based on the local needs, opportunities, policies, and cultures of individual schools.

1 Buy-in from school and district leadership is crucial for the long-term planning and wide-ranging policy changes involved in setting up and implementing an outdoor learning program.

- a. **Building infrastructure for outdoor learning takes careful planning, flexibility, and stakeholder management.** Several pilots found the process for building new outdoor infrastructure, such as greenhouses, docks, and yurts, more complicated and time-consuming than expected. Pilot staff explained that administrative engagement was vital for obtaining zoning approvals; liaising with contractors; and making decisions regarding timelines, costs, and

¹ These pilots were supported by the Maine Department of Education's Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) program, which was funded by a \$17 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Rethink K–12 Education program.

other factors that arise while building new infrastructure. Schools considering new Outdoor Education facilities should focus on developing consensus and leadership buy-in about what to build and where, obtaining zoning approvals, finding contractors, obtaining supplies, and actual installation. A thorough understanding of local building codes and the structural needs of your outdoor learning program—like power and water utilities, Wi-Fi connectivity, storage space, and necessary safety—measures can help ensure a smooth transition from planning to construction.

- b. Policy changes requiring administrator support may be necessary to make full use of outdoor learning spaces.** These changes could include expanding transition times between classes so students can move in and outdoors and adjusting schedules to allow for longer class periods for outdoor learning. In some subjects, it might mean offering or requiring more teacher professional development focused on outdoor learning, or more planning time for teachers to think about how best to use outdoor spaces. For example, regional school unit (RSU) 1 (Bath) Middle School created an entirely new schedule with longer blocks and better aligned teacher planning time to facilitate project-based learning and opportunities to learn off campus.

2 Taking children outside requires extra attention to student behavior and “classroom” management, especially with younger children, but the change in environment can help students who have struggled in traditional classrooms to become more engaged learners. Some Outdoor Education programs serve the entire school, or even all schools in a district, while others are more narrowly tailored to certain subjects or students with particular needs. A common theme across these experiences was that the change in routine and environment often requires more attention from teachers on behavioral issues, including in some cases the use of additional staff to help with classroom management, especially during transitions. However, there was a consensus among pilot schools that Outdoor Education was a net positive for student engagement, confidence, and learning. Some schools, such as RSU 9 (Mt. Blue) High School and RSU 35 (Marshwood) Great Works School, used formalized assessments to help understand and track student social-emotional engagement while others used student surveys and other school metrics such as attendance or office referrals as proxies to help understand student engagement. Some pilots—RSU 35 (Marshwood) Great Works School, RSU 89 (Katahdin), and RSU 13 (Oceanside) High School—are specifically focusing on high-need groups in their school communities by supporting school counseling and student support services with pilot implementation. Other schools, such as RSU 73 (Spruce Mtn.) Elementary and school administrative unit (SAU) Limestone (Community School), focused on students with high truancy rates.

“All three of my children have deeply enjoyed the opportunities to be outside learning. It is engaging and required a different way of thinking and listening that they enjoy.”

– Parent,
School Union 76

3 Outdoor learning spaces can support school-community relationships, especially by providing semi-public spaces for people or organizations to gather and enjoy the outdoors. While outdoor learning spaces will primarily be designed for students, schools may consider opening some spaces for public use, especially when school is not in session. For example, School Union (SU) 76 (Deer Isle-Stonington) built a trail through a red maple swamp that exists between the elementary and high schools. During the school day, students use the trail and nearby spaces for class activities, but on weekends it is open to the public for walking, birdwatching, and other activities. These dual uses can help strengthen connections between the school and the community, which can have positive spillover effects when it comes to recruiting volunteers or maintaining support for funding school programs. When designing and building infrastructure for Outdoor Education, schools should consider ways to solicit input from the community about what they would value, and then establish clear but inviting

policies for public use of facilities. Additionally, local partners, such as nature centers or outdoors clubs, can advise on aspects of outdoor learning, including design of spaces, activities to offer, and so on.

4 Families can be great assets for Outdoor Education programs, and proactive steps to involve families can mitigate concerns about trade-offs with core content. Many pilots took intentional steps to involve parents in the planning and implementation of their outdoor learning pilots. For example, some pilots invited parents and students to contribute to the maintenance of spaces or organization of additional outdoor activities. Parental roles can include chaperoning outdoor activities or supporting upkeep of outdoor learning facilities while students can assist in caring for outdoor gear and planning seasonal planting and care for gardens or other plants. Taking a proactive approach to parental involvement can help parents see firsthand how students engage in outdoor learning, and thereby address concerns some parents may have that going outside takes away from traditional approaches.



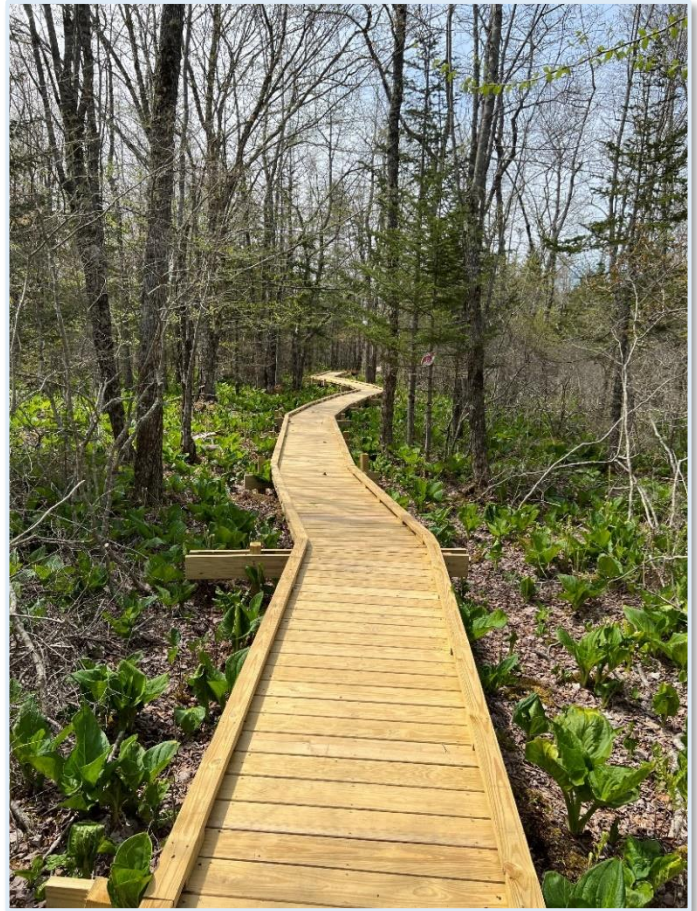
Pre-kindergarten students from MSAD 28 (Camden) Elementary School taking a rest between activities at one of the wooden educational platforms built with RREV funds.

5 Building accessible spaces and providing gear and equipment can make outdoor learning accessible to all students. Outdoor learning can benefit all children, so schools should consider incorporating accessibility into their design from the beginning. Some students, such as those with physical mobility challenges, may need additional support to access all spaces. RREV pilots such as Maine School Administrative District (MSAD) 59 (Madison) Elementary School and SU 76 (Deer Isle-Stonington) built designated accessible outdoor learning areas. Schools should also be cognizant that not all families can afford outdoor all-weather gear or other accessories for going outside, especially in the winter. Pilots such as MSAD 11 (Gardiner) High School maintain stocked gear closets with heavy coats, hats, gloves, and other items so that all students can learn outside, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

6 Activities such as journaling can help students reflect on their learning and its impact on their lives. Many pilots found that students benefited from activities in which they reflected on their experiences outside and how they could apply them to their lives. For example, students at RSU 1 (Bath) Middle School kept journals to write about their experiences outdoors and the effects on their mood and wellness. Students at RSU 9 (Mt. Blue) High School also engaged in resiliency training and mindfulness activities in order to connect their work on outdoor skills and certifications to their own well-being.

7 Teachers appreciate practical tips and tools and ongoing coaching about how to use outdoor spaces. Many of the teachers involved in RREV pilots said they most appreciated professional development that provided ready-to-use lessons and ideas for activities, and were less interested in abstract content about the benefits of learning outside. Teachers also appreciated ongoing coaching and support focused on developing outdoor learning strategies that matched their teaching style. For example, at RSU 20 (Searsport) District Middle High School teachers used their lived experience to support the design of new outdoor learning units. Other pilots, such as MSAD 17 (Agnes Grey Elementary School) and SU 76 (Deer Isle-Stonington), retained a place-based education integration specialist to help teachers make the most effective uses of outdoor learning spaces.

8 A small group of engaged teachers can serve as “ambassadors” for Outdoor Education with their colleagues. When rolling out a new educational approach, especially when it involves teaching in new environments, it is common for some teachers to embrace the change and others to be less enthusiastic. Schools interested in creating more outdoor learning opportunities may want to start by training a smaller group of teachers who have expressed interest in outdoor learning, and from there seek to grow interest in the program. A few RREV pilots used this approach, such as RSU 73 (Spruce Mtn.) Elementary School, where 4th-grade teachers served as pioneers to receive training to later act as mentors to the rest of the grades. RSU 25 (Bucksport) Middle School's and SAU Portland Public Schools' pilots also selected a group of teachers across grades to start receiving training before expanding their programs.



The wheelchair-accessible nature trail at SU 76 (Deer Isle-Stonington) Elementary School.