

Rationale for Learning Outside

Oregon’s experience with the COVID-19 global pandemic is dynamic and tactics to address this challenge continually adjust as our knowledge and circumstances change. This includes integrating new learning about how the disease spreads and new information regarding the effectiveness of safety protocols. Given the urgency of returning our children to in-person instruction, **Oregon has a substantial opportunity to use outside spaces as a strategic, equitable, and innovative approach** to ensuring more children have access to high-quality in-person instruction. Using outside space offers a unique opportunity to provide:

- access to technology and technology supports;
- social emotional support;
- access to food;
- academic support;
- safe learning environments;
- quiet learning environments; and
- access to accommodations.

Learning in open-air spaces was a successful strategy used in the 1900s to prevent the spread of tuberculosis and to mitigate transmission during the 1918 influenza pandemic. Learning outside has also been a creative approach to bringing students together this school year for face-to-face instruction in a few countries such as England and Sweden as well as in districts in Vermont, Florida, and California (see [Resources](#)). Benefits for students learning outdoors include increased attention, retention, engagement, improved mood, and reduction of behavioral issues. Outside learning spaces are a natural and affordable way to reduce the spread of COVID-19 while providing in-person schooling.

Studies from around the world suggest that COVID-19 transmission rates are much lower in outdoors settings, with most studies finding <10% of cases possibly linked to outdoors transmission, and some studies suggesting that <1% of transmission may actually occur outdoors. The main means of spread of the virus is through droplets and airborne particles, and risk drops rapidly with distance and with fresh air flow. Nonetheless, close contact with others is a risk whether indoors or outdoors, and preventive measures such as maintaining 6 feet of physical distance, wearing face coverings, and washing or sanitizing hands frequently are important both indoors and outdoors¹. In Oregon, lower transmission rates in outside spaces was evident during this summer’s wildfire events. For over 9,000 firefighters living and working together daily outside in conjunction with strong safety protocols such as small cohorts, physical distancing, consistent hand-washing, boxed meals, face coverings and daily screening procedure, there were no COVID-19 outbreaks in [Oregon’s fire camps](#).

Oregon has a rich history of connections between people, the land, and outdoor recreation. Oregon has one of the longest running statewide outdoor education programs in the nation. Since 1957, Oregonians have recognized through state policy the educational benefits of having youth connect to the natural beauty and deep connections to Oregon’s natural resources.

Outside learning environments, in conjunction with strong safety protocols, provide school districts with an innovative option to create access to high-quality on-site instruction for students in ways that



promote teacher-student connections. The proximity to green spaces, contact with nature, and being in open spaces has the potential to improve overall mental and physical health along with cognitive development by lowering levels of stress, improving concentration, and reducing behavioral challenges.

In Oregon, according to recent data published in the December 2020 Economic and Revenue Forecast, the switch from in-person to distance learning due to the pandemic has resulted in a number of challenges, including:

- Fewer than ten percent (50,000) of Oregon’s K-12 public students (500,000+) have received some form of in-person instruction during the first part (September through December) of the 2020-21 school year.
- Nearly 1 in 5 Oregonians in the workforce meet the following definition: they have children, work in a job that cannot be done from home, and do not have another non-working adult present in the household. (Oregon Economic and Revenue Forecast, Dec. 2020)
- Another 11 percent of Oregonians have kids, do not have another non-working adult present, but can work from home. Juggling work responsibilities and ensuring their kids attend class and get their homework done is a daily struggle, to say the least. (Oregon Economic and Revenue Forecast, Dec. 2020)
- There are large inequities regarding access to technology with lower-income, under-resourced communities, specifically, Black, Latinx, Native, American, Indigenous and people of color, and rural households less likely to have high-speed internet at home. (Oregon Economic and Revenue Forecast, Dec. 2020)
- The effectiveness of instruction provided remotely via technology is potentially lower, resulting in fewer skills being developed and less knowledge gained. (Oregon Economic and Revenue Forecast, Dec. 2020)

Learning Outside Guidance

Learning Outside Defined

Learning Outside is an instructional model to provide schools who are operating Comprehensive Distance Learning (CDL) an option for offering in-person instruction that goes beyond the use of Limited-in-Person guidance. If a school is serving students through a Hybrid or In-Person Learning instructional model, they may elect to offer Learning Outside for some or all of their instruction.

All K-12 public, private and charter schools have the option to provide Learning Outside. This includes schools operating in Comprehensive Distance Learning; schools offering Limited In-Person Instruction under CDL, and those serving students through an On-site or Hybrid instructional model.

If a school is in Comprehensive Distance Learning (CDL), Learning Outside provides an option for offering in-person instruction that goes beyond the use of [Limited In-Person](#) guidance. Learning Outside serves as a focused approach for schools operating in the CDL instructional model to bring students together in an outside learning space. Because schools can bring more students together outside and for longer periods, it allows schools to target specific grade levels, classes or students from a school with

Supplemental Guidance for Learning Outside



opportunities to participate in learning with a teacher outside. Learning Outside can be used in conjunction with Limited In-Person support and as a strategy to offer instruction that counts toward required instructional minutes. Learning Outside is recognized as an innovative and strategic instructional model to provide more Oregon students access to in-person instruction.

Learning Outside is always an option when you are operating in the On-Site or Hybrid Instructional Model. The following limitations apply when Learning Outside in CDL.

Table 1. Options Comparison while learning in CDL: Learning Outside vs. Limited In-Person

Situation	Learning Outside in CDL	Limited-in-Person Instruction in CDL
Instructional Time	Must meet instructional time requirements in combination of any learning outside and distance learning. *Learning outside does count toward meeting instructional time requirement	Time spent in Limited-in-Person does not qualify toward meeting instructional time requirements.
Cohorts for Transportation and Meals	Students are limited to two cohorts only for transportation; cohorts are limited to 20 students for the purpose of transportation.	No more than 20 students in a cohort.
Time On-Site	No limit	No more than 2 consecutive hours.
Operational Blueprint	Complete Operational Blueprint (all sections), including brief description of learning outside approach. Submit and post.	Complete Operational Blueprint (all sections). Submit and post.
Key practices for minimizing spread of COVID-19	Physical distancing, face coverings, hand hygiene, cohorting, cleaning and disinfection of high-touch surfaces, isolation and quarantine.	Physical distancing, face coverings, hand hygiene, cohorting, cleaning and disinfection of high-touch surfaces, isolation and quarantine, ventilation (maximize fresh air flow in closed spaces).



To offer Learning Outside during CDL a school will be required to do the following:

Required

- Schools operating in CDL must follow [Section 1-3](#) of RSSL to offer Learning Outside.
- Schools operating in CDL must complete the [Operational Blueprint](#), and submit to their local board, LPHA, and ODE.
 - Updated Operational Blueprint must be posted on district website as well.
- Schools that use multiple, separate outdoor spaces must adhere to the maximum number of students and staff per each outdoor space. (See Outside Learning Space Defined)
 - Each separate outdoor space must have separate entry and exit points, bathroom sanitation facilities, and food distribution centers.
- If bathroom facilities from the building are used they must be exclusively used for students and staff from one learning outside area. Limited in person instruction can be offered at the same time as learning outside if there are separate entry and exit spaces and bathroom facilities, and separation of instructional groups is maintained at all times.
- Transportation: Cohort size of 20; students are limited to participating in 2 cohorts.

Recommended

- ⇒ Apply the additional CDC guidelines on cleaning and disinfection of outside spaces [available online](#).

Outdoor/Outside Learning Spaces

Careful planning and preparation is essential to minimizing risk of spreading COVID-19 outside.

Outside Learning Space Defined

Outside learning space means an open-air space, or a structure with at least 75% of the area of its sides open for airflow. For a school to offer multiple outdoor learning spaces there must be sufficient space to accommodate the number of students and staff in any outside learning space following physical distancing requirements between all students and staff, a natural or artificial barrier separating the spaces, separate drop-off and exit sites, separate bathroom and handwashing facilities, and separate food distribution centers. Separate learning spaces should not have any mingling of individuals between the spaces.

Required

- Outdoor/outside learning spaces must have at least 75% of area of sides open for airflow.
- If a school is using multiple separate outside learning spaces, each outside learning space must have separate drop-off and exit space, separate bathroom and hand washing facilities (these can include portable facilities), and separate food distribution centers.
- Establish a master calendar showing how outside space will be used simultaneously or sequentially by different groups or people, for instance:
 - physical education classes, with outside activities
 - recess,
 - before/after school programs,

- library programs, with outside reading and meeting areas,
 - garden programs, with rotating visits from different classes, and
 - community access to the school grounds after hours.
- Each cohort must have its own meeting space.
 - Establish protocols to support students' IEPs and 504 plans during Learning Outside. Engage district/school special education specialists, case managers, parents, regional ESD specialists (this may look similar to requirements for Outdoor School programs).

Weather

Oregon's four seasons each pose unique opportunities and challenges for Learning Outside. Oregon has a strong history and culture of spending time outside during every season. Moving learning outside in many ways is a connection with Oregon's past. Despite the challenges that climate and weather present to Learning Outside, there are [multiple examples](#) of successful implementation.

Required

- Create a clear policy to decide what weather conditions would suspend Learning Outside.
- Create a communications plan for families around inclement weather that would suspend Learning Outside.
- Plan for supplies and equipment for all students to be able to participate in Learning Outside (shelter, blankets (not shared, but assigned to individual students), proper outside clothing, heat sources, shade, wind breaks).
- Ensure all staff are aware of health risks posed by weather, including heat exhaustion, heat stroke, frostbite, and hypothermia.

Recommended

- ⇒ Plan activities throughout the day that incorporate movement, which is both healthy and increases body temperature during cooler weather.

Operations

Required

- Review district- and school-level policies and procedures related to children learning outside and other outdoor activities.
- Meals must be delivered, served, and eaten in accordance with safety protocols.
- Plan for how staff will communicate when separated by substantial distance and communicate this plan--for instance, staff may use walkie talkies or cell phones.
- Update emergency planning related to the safety considerations presented in the outdoor space.
- Develop diagrams for seating arrangements that reflect distancing requirements in RSSL (see [Outdoor Infrastructure Planning Strategies and Overview](#) for example diagrams).
- If limited in-person is happening concurrently and another group of students are participating in learning outside, there needs to be separate bathroom and quarantining facilities.
- If Learning Outside will involve technology, develop a plan to train staff in the use of the devices and applications in outdoor spaces.



Recommended

- ⇒ Learn about the concerns and questions relative to learning outside and assess where additional capacity and support may be needed from external partners for learning outside.
 - Develop a communication plan to engage families and stakeholders in the conversation about taking learning outside. Consider needs for translation and interpretation.
- ⇒ Consider permission slip guidance related to walking versus bussed off-site field trips. Determine whether teachers need permission slips each time they take students outside or whether more flexible permission can be granted.
- ⇒ Consider partnering to use community resources (for instance, parks, businesses, and other outdoor spaces) not owned by the district.
- ⇒ Reflect on the weather conditions, including identifying the [climate zone your school site is in](#), listing weather events in your area that are frequent enough to require adaptations during the months school is in session and approximate number of days with weather events that could be disruptive.
- ⇒ Develop a backup plan for days when outdoor learning is not possible due to weather.
- ⇒ Identify and plan for any presence of disruptive noise (such as nearby construction or manufacturing), disruptive odors, safety concerns, and any other environmental concerns that could impact the space.
- ⇒ While walking through the campus or other location, use the [chart](#) to mark the following features on your site plan and/or aerial photograph:
 - Proposed student entries and exits; drop off areas
 - Areas that must be kept clear for emergency vehicles and delivery trucks
 - Electrical outlets, hose bibs, downspouts
 - Areas of campus where Wi-Fi is strong/weak
 - Trash/recycling bins and dumpsters
 - Building entries/exits
 - Bathrooms that open directly to outdoors or near entries
 - Location of each grade level and special classrooms, especially Pre-K and K classrooms
 - Existing outdoor classrooms, seating areas, shelters, nature play spaces, gardens, etc.
 - Areas needed for P.E., recess, meal breaks, or after school care
 - Sources of disruptive noise that must be buffered
 - Sources of disruptive odors that must be avoided
 - Visual distractions that must be screened
 - ADA path of travel
 - Classroom windows that open up onto the schoolyard
 - Areas with significant slope
 - Direction of prevailing winds
 - Identification of potential hazards outdoors and plans to minimize risks they pose to students (e.g. roads, exhaust vents for indoor air, climbable objects and objects/locations that pose a risk of falls, bodies of water, etc.)

- If Learning Outside will involve technology and internet access, plan for mobile technology tools that supports connecting the Learning Outside with the various instructional models, including streaming synchronously or recording for asynchronous learning.
- If Learning Outside will involve use of technology, explore safe and creative solutions to support connectivity and electricity (scheduled charging, cohort groups to share charging stations).

Funding

Taking learning outside doesn't require expensive equipment, clothing, or gear, however, planning with equity in mind does require consideration for providing any necessary clothing, coats or supplies to remove barriers to participation. Some spaces may offer expanded opportunity with simple infrastructure installations.

Recommended

- ⇒ Discuss how the investments connect to long-term planning. For instance, do you plan to use any of the investments you are making now as a COVID-19 response, to support or expand an ongoing outdoor learning environment for your school? Are you interested in developing a green schoolyard program, over the long-term?
- ⇒ Review and update budgets to reflect needs for outside learning, prioritizing funding for investments that will increase accessibility and usability to the space for students with physical disabilities and supplies, such as coats and blankets (see [Outdoor Infrastructure Cost Estimate Tool](#) as a resource for budgeting).
- ⇒ To offset costs, consider partnerships and donations, such as:
 - Talking with community foundations. Many foundations have adjusted their funding priorities to respond to the pandemic.
 - Talking with local business and industry to find out how they can be part of the solution to help have a healthy community.
 - Seeking in-kind donations, such as donations of tree stumps, tree cookies, straw bales, fabric, seat cushions, and more to take learning outside.
 - Engaging your Parent-Teacher Organization and other community organizations in supporting your effort to obtain donations.

Resources

Professional Learning and Planning

- The North American Association for Environmental Education has a 2-part recorded webinar on "How to Start an Outdoor Classroom at Any School" available for viewing:
 - **Part 1** covers the 'inside' work that needs to be done before heading outside with your students, including: finding your WHY, building alliances with administration and families, and how to find your space and place in nature.
 - [Register to watch the recording](#)



- **Part 2** covers the "outside" work that happens once you've laid the groundwork for a successful nature-based learning program. Topics include safety, schedules and academic time, and good gear. [Watch the recording.](#)
- The [Children & Nature Network Green Schoolyards Resource Hub](#) provides ideas for funding, including: Bond Funding, Green Stormwater Infrastructure Funding, Corporate Funding, Conservation Funding, Federal Funding, and State & Local Tax Funding.
- [Outdoor Classroom Assessment](#) from the National COVID-19 Outdoor Learning Initiative.
- For more information as you begin, please see: [Outdoor Infrastructure Strategies for Taking Learning Outside as Schools Reopen.](#)

Selected Articles

- PBS News, July 2020. [Analysis: Why Some Schools Stayed Open During the 1918 Flu Pandemic.](#)
- New York Times, July 2020. [Schools Beat Earlier Plagues with Outdoor Classes. We Should Too.](#)
- Washington Post, September 2020. [Kids Went to School During this Epidemic. In Winter. In New England.](#)
- Ed Surge, October 2020. [What if Schools Viewed Outdoor Learning as 'Plan A'?](#)

ⁱ Tommaso Celeste Bulfone, Mohsen Malekinejad, George W Rutherford, Nooshin Razani, Outdoor Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and Other Respiratory Viruses: A Systematic Review, *The Journal of Infectious Diseases*, jiaa742, <https://doi.org/10.1093/infdis/jiaa742>