



2020-21 Outdoor Policy Trends

This guide highlights state and local policy trends from around the United States designed to build opportunities for youth to learn about, and experience the outdoors.

All youth deserve to have transformational experiences in the outdoors, with their teachers, families, peers, and communities, yet not every youth in Maine has these opportunities. This guide is intended as a tool to inform and inspire as we seek to make change on the state and local levels in Maine.

Equity

With an increased national focus on equity throughout the U.S., many states have proposed or started to implement programs and policies to improve equity in access in the outdoors.

Where? Alaska, California, Colorado, & New Mexico

Fact-Finding & Study

To set the stage for future work to expand access to outdoor learning, some states have sought to ensure that their eventual policies and programs are based off of strong data.

Where? Georgia, Nebraska, & New York

Outdoor Learning in Schools

In 2020, schools used outdoor learning as a strategy to mitigate COVID-19. After seeing the benefits of outdoor learning, many decision-makers plan to continue teaching outside in schools, even in a post-COVID world.

Where? Maine & Washington State

Early Childhood Education

Some states have developed new policies focused on outdoor early childhood education licensing to address barriers to young children learning outside.

Where? Illinois & Washington State

Equity

Photo: Maine Environmental Education Association



With an increased national focus on equity throughout the U.S., many states have proposed or implemented policies that reduce barriers to accessing the outdoors. Within this broader trend, outdoor equity funds have been the most prevalent, but are joined by other new approaches.

Outdoor Equity Funds

New Mexico, California, and Colorado, have developed outdoor equity funds in the past two years. These funds are designed to support organizations and programs that work with youth from BIPOC, LGBTQ+, disabled, low-income, and rural communities to increase access to the outdoors. Illinois' state legislature has been considering a similar bill.

New Mexico Outdoor Equity Fund

As part of the 2019 bill that created the New Mexico Office of Outdoor Recreation, an equity fund was created to support outdoor recreation and learning specifically for individuals from historically underrepresented backgrounds across the state of New Mexico. New Mexico was the first state in the nation to create a statewide Outdoor Equity Fund.

California Outdoor Equity Grants Program

The Director of Parks and Recreation created California's Outdoor Equity Grants program in 2019 with the intention of increasing the ability of residents in low-income urban and rural communities to participate in outdoor environmental education experiences on public lands.

Colorado Outdoor Equity Fund

The state of Colorado is internationally renowned for its natural landscapes, and year-round outdoor activities. However, systemic inequities have made access to the outdoors and outdoor programming inaccessible to many. The purpose of this grant program is to increase access to Colorado's state parks, public lands, and other outdoor areas for

underserved youth and their families. This policy establishes an Outdoor Equity Board within the division of Parks and Wildlife that is responsible for managing the Outdoor Equity Grant Program.

Illinois Outdoor Equity Grants Program

While tabled for the 2021 legislative session, Illinois has been considering an outdoor equity fund. Modeled after New Mexico's Outdoor Equity Fund, the purpose of this program is to increase access to outdoor learning opportunities to underserved communities across Illinois.

Other Equity Policies

Alaska Office of Outdoor Equity

In Alaska, public lands play an essential role in the state's economic well-being, and demand for access and maintenance within state parks continues to increase. This bill urges the Governor of Alaska to establish an Office of Outdoor Equity to allocate funds to be distributed as grants. The purpose of Alaska's Office of Outdoor Equity is to encourage greater diversity, equity, and inclusion in the outdoors and workforce development.

California Environmental Equity and Access Act

This policy reinforces the state of California's commitment to ensuring that all Californians have access to, and can benefit from the state's cultural and natural resources. This policy empowers the Department of Natural Resources to consider identity status in program implementation and grant awards.

Fact-Finding & Study



Several states are pursuing efforts to ensure that their policies and programs are informed by strong data to expand access to outdoor learning. In Maine, the 2019 Census of Community-Based Environmental Learning ensures our policy efforts are data-informed. The census was created by the Maine Mathematics and Science Alliance and the Maine Environmental Education Association.

Georgia's Senate Outdoor Learning Study Committee

This bill would establish a Senate Outdoor Learning Study Committee tasked with analyzing existing legislation and recommending amendments or new legislation when appropriate.

Nebraska's Outdoor Recreation and Education Study Committee

The newly created Outdoor Recreation and Education Study Committee of the Nebraska Legislature is tasked with completing an appraisal of Nebraska's outdoor recreation and education potential. By January of 2022, this committee must develop a report that includes the following:

- A list of policies, programs, projects, and activities to meet their identified goals
- Essential research, data, and modeling to help the state to meet its goals, and
- Recommendations for the prioritization of policies, programs, projects, and activities to be funded.

New York's Outdoor Education & Recreation Legislative Task Force

If enacted, this bill would establish a legislative task force to promote and expand environmental education and recreation throughout New York. This bill would assemble representatives from community organizations and state agencies to develop and promote a framework for New York's outdoor environmental education and recreation plan that prioritizes developing, and retaining outdoor learning access.

For more information on these and other Outdoor Learning and Recreation Policy throughout the US, visit nbeconsortium.com/outdoor-policy-guide.

Outdoor Learning in Schools

Photo: Katahdin Schools RSU 89



In 2020, some states and municipalities recognized the impact of outdoor learning as a response to Covid-19 in schools, and have sought ways to make supports for outdoor learning permanent.

Washington's Promoting Access to Outdoor Education in Public Schools

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many schools used outdoor classrooms as a way to bring students and teachers together safely for in-person instruction. This bill builds off of that momentum, and charges the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction with establishing a 4-year pilot program for outdoor, nature-based education programs in public schools.

Portland, ME Outdoor Learning Coordinator Position

As part of Portland Public School's FY22 budget, the Portland, ME school district affirmed its dedication to outdoor learning by establishing a permanent Outdoor Learning Coordinator position who works with stipended liaisons at each district school to meet educator needs and to serve as a hub for sharing information throughout the district.



Photo: Maine Coast Heritage Trust

Early Childhood Education



Research continues to show that learning outdoors from an early age can greatly benefit children. Some states have sought to address barriers to young children learning outside by developing policies that license outdoor early education programs.

Washington's Outdoor Early Childhood Education Licensing

A 2017 bill established an initiative to license outdoor early learning and child care programs in the state of Washington, making Washington the first state in the U.S. to license outdoor preschools. Prior to this bill, there were more than 40 unlicensed outdoor child care programs throughout the state, making it impossible for them to function as full-day programs.

Illinois Outdoor Preschool Licensing

Modeled after Washington's licensing policy, this bill would establish a 4-year pilot initiative to license 10 pilot locations with the chance for additional locations to apply after the first year, making Illinois the second state in the U.S. to license outdoor preschools.