

Supporting Outdoor Experiences with Teacher Professional Learning

PreK-12 teachers support students everyday. Teachers spark excitement about learning for their students, provide support for mental and physical health, address challenges students may be facing at home, and create welcoming and safe learning environments. Teachers are also learners themselves. PreK-12 teachers need access to quality professional learning experiences to support their students by taking full advantage of utilizing the outdoors as a classroom.

During the 19-20 and 20-21 school years, teachers had to quickly shift gears to adapt to shifting health and safety requirements. In many cases, this meant a quick adjustment to teaching online. While online learning may remain an important component of PreK-12 education, there is also an opportunity to re-imagine learning for the 21-22 school year and beyond. With many students returning to school after a chaotic year, a shift to outdoor learning may provide a more enriching and healthy learning environment. To do this, PreK-12 teachers will need support to integrate proven methodologies into their practice.

Professional learning can take many forms, including virtual, hybrid and in-person courses, ranging from a few hours to multiple days. Teachers can be further supported through implementing communities of practice, working with mentors and community partners. These professional learning opportunities can assist teachers in meeting state educational requirements in multiple subject areas while also providing the necessary support to bring learning outdoors, further enriching the school day experience for their students.

Recommendation:

Ensure that every PreK-12 teacher, no matter where they live, participates in at least one professional learning experience to support environmental and outdoor education.



Evidence Base for Professional Learning

There is evidence that shows when teachers participate in professional learning they implement new practices in their classrooms. For professional learning to be effective, it must:

1. Be content focused
2. Incorporate active learning
3. Support collaboration
4. Use models and modeling of effective practice
5. Provide coaching and expert support
6. Offer opportunities for feedback and reflection
7. Be of a sustained duration ([Learning Policy Institute, 2017](#))

Among the potential outcomes, research has shown that participation in professional learning:

- Motivates and inspires teachers, and adding a mentoring component provides the tools, confidence, and contextualized support to be able to implement environmental education. ([citation](#))

- Increases teachers' content knowledge, which can then be implemented in the classroom ([Buczynski, Sandy; Hansen, C. Bobbi, 2010](#))
- May improve student outcomes if professional learning integrates content learning with analysis of student learning and teaching ([Heller JI, Daehler KR, Wong N, Shinohara M, Miratrix LW., 2012](#))
- Professional learning increases teacher content knowledge in a subject area and participating in a professional learning workshop has significant relationship with how often that subject is taught ([Sara Hendrickson Velardi, Elizabeth Folta, Laura Rickard & Diane Kuehn \(2015\)](#))
- Preparation for teaching outdoors, including the opportunity for reflection, yields a positive outdoor teaching experience. ([Tal, T., Morag, O., 2009](#))

What are the Key Components for Success?

Classroom integration: Environmental and outdoor education professional learning opportunities should connect to what is already occurring in the classroom. They should be anchored to state and national academic standards and support goals for learning and/or student achievement. They are not meant to be something extra, but rather an educational approach that helps teachers meet their learning objectives. They can provide authentic, engaging interdisciplinary learning that crosses traditional boundaries between disciplines.

Utilizing Partners: Many community partners deliver quality professional learning that can meet the needs of classroom educators and relevant state standards. Zoos, aquariums, nature centers and North American Association for Environmental Education Affiliates may provide regular professional learning in your district or state with an emphasis on outdoor learning. Working with external partners on developing professional learning for educators may also lead to additional learning opportunities for K-12 students, including outreach and field experiences.

Long-Term learning: In addition to participating in professional learning opportunities, teachers should have the ability to connect with mentors, a community of practice or external support. Research indicates that when teachers have these external supports, they are more likely to integrate the practices they have learned in a professional learning course into their classroom.

Incentives to participate: Teachers attending a professional learning offering should be supported by their school and/or district. Incentives to participate may include utilizing contract hours for professional learning, offering a stipend or credits for relicensure, including principals and other school administrators in learning opportunities, and providing resources for implementing new strategies.

Developing skills: Professional learning for teachers on outdoor and environmental education should include content knowledge in addition to the best practices and methods for bringing instruction outdoors.

How?

Allocate Recovery Act Funding to provide every [State] PreK-12 educator with at least one environmental and outdoor professional learning opportunity annually.

Costs of teacher professional learning programs vary by provider. To calculate cost for a specific program or provider, use the following formula:

Number of Educators X Cost Per Person = Total Cost

Example: In Utah, Project Learning Tree educator professional development is \$40/teacher. There are approximately 300 K-8 teachers in the Salt Lake City School District. Professional development for this district would total \$13,200

Affiliates may want to contract with local education agencies and/or state agencies to develop and provide professional learning programs. Cost for this work should be determined by the Affiliate and their hourly rate for developing programs/consulting services.