

## OUTDOOR LEARNING CASE STUDY

# Kingfield Elementary School

Rural District · ~109 Students · PreK-8<sup>th</sup> grade  
Serving the western mountains of Maine



Located near mountains, streams, forests and open spaces in rural Western Maine, the Kingfield Elementary School is situated within a community of outdoor enthusiasts. Many parents are employed by the Sugarloaf ski resort, and enjoy activities like hunting and snowmobiling. The school's core values "Recognize and value our connection to the natural environment as a place for learning" are supported by the school's property that includes plenty of outdoor space and close proximity to nature trails.

Over the past few years, outdoor learning has steadily gained a presence at the school with the support of principal Johanna Prince, who has a background in environmental education. An after-school gardening program became part of the regular classroom curriculum, a forest program for kindergarteners emerged, and—with the support of the Maine Mathematics and Science Alliance—a Green Team project has engaged students and staff in composting.

At the onset of COVID-19, Prince and the staff saw an opportunity to increase outdoor learning. The school was able to access a variety of types of support—from donations of outdoor clothing and outdoor classroom supplies from parents, to connections with organizations like UMaine Cooperative Extension, Project Learning Tree, WinterKids, the Maine Local Living School, and Juniper Hill School for professional development for teachers. Financial support (for infrastructure and trainings) came from federal covid relief funds, the Biosophical Institute, Poland Spring, Carrabassett school board, and Maine Environmental Education Association.

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### TOOLS FOR CHANGE



**Connecting with local and national resources**



**Administrative support**



**Support from community partners**



**Outdoor infrastructure: Classroom & Trails**



**Staff teamwork & creativity**



**Professional development for staff**

*"Learning should be an innate, joyful, experience. If children are respected and challenged, they will want to come to school. Outdoor learning is a part of that."*

—Johanna Prince, principal



### BENEFITS



**Community involvement and relationships**



**Students more curious and enthusiastic**



**Safety during a global health crisis**



**Teachers collaborate on solutions together**

Using these resources, Kingfield Elementary built an outdoor pavilion, set up outdoor chalkboards and stump seating, provided students with personal outdoor material backpacks, and supported teacher professional development in outdoor learning. The school now has three designated outdoor classroom spaces that teachers can use for their classes. Students in grades K-4 spend at least a half hour outside each day for their morning meetings (rain or shine!) and at least an hour of outdoor science learning each week.

Teacher community and teamwork has been a key part of supporting outdoor learning. The school has formed teams of teachers based on grade level, and they support each other in developing integrated units and how to teach them outdoors. Although teaching outdoors is not required, the principal set the tone and provided opportunities and support for taking class outside.

When class is outside, teachers notice behavioral improvements among students. They notice more natural curiosity and excitement, as well as leadership and collaboration in new ways. One class of students set up outdoor classrooms by carrying out chalkboards and arranging seating, and those students have felt a sense of accomplishment and meaningful connection to the outdoor space where they now regularly visit to learn.

Challenges arose during this first year of outdoor learning during a pandemic. Staff see the need for more time for professional development and lesson planning, as well as support with integrating curricular standards in regular outdoor learning lessons.

Because such outdoor learning materials and training needs weren't covered in the school's annual budget, it was key to acquire outside funding for these pieces. In the future, Prince hopes to incorporate annual outdoor learning needs in the budget itself. Prince would also like to involve fifth through eighth graders in outdoor learning more regularly, as well as incorporating more aspects of place based learning and connection to the local area into the outdoor experiences.

Overall, the support of local families, community organizations, and an enthusiastic administrator have helped shepherd the expansion of outdoor learning during the first full year of COVID-19. Innovation flourished in an atmosphere where teachers were supported to take risks and rewarded for innovative thinking. Teachers and administration alike hope for more regular financial support to enable students to benefit from learning outdoors for years to come.

### Brought to You by



*"My kids are great at questioning everything. Outdoors, we are coming up with solutions and learning about animals together."*

—Erica Luce, teacher



### COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

- Maine Mathematics & Science Alliance
- UMaine Cooperative Extension
- Project Learning Tree
- Juniper Hill School
- WinterKids
- Biosophical Institute
- Maine Environmental Education Association
- Carrabassett Valley School Board
- Maine DEP
- Franklin Community Health Network & more!