

How to Create an Outdoor Classroom in the Era of COVID-19

The key to preventing spread of any communicable disease, even COVID-19, is the diligent use of multiple layers of protection. The Maine Department of Education has created [public health guidelines](#) for the safe opening of indoor classrooms. Outdoor classrooms, in addition to bringing students into nature, create a robust added layer of protection as the ambient air dilutes potentially infectious respiratory droplets. Moving a classroom outdoors has many advantages, but what can these rooms look like while serving the communicable disease transmission needs of schools?

Space Identification

Whether your school is urban or rural, identify a space that can be set up out of mainstream foot and car traffic. Consider the use of tents to provide sun and rain protection and self-standing screens to prevent visible distraction and aid in privacy. Consider if electricity will be needed for projectors or for charging school electronic equipment or hot spots. If your students will be using the school restrooms, consider the egress and ingress of students from your classroom into the school when identifying your outdoor classroom location.

Room Spacing and Setup

Outdoor spaces can be set up in many ways. Maine DOE mandates that teachers remain 6 feet in distance from students and that students are placed 3-6 feet in distance from one another. Think creatively about 'desks' and consider what other materials can serve as a chair or desk (e.g. lawn chairs, stools, logs, or picnic tables!) Knowing this, consider placing desks and chairs in circular or U-shaped arrangement facing toward where the educator would stand. Assign students to their seats and consider how students will enter and exit the space allowing for spacing requirements. Regardless of space, remember that all students and staff are required to wear masks while in school.

Free-standing white or chalk boards provide a barrier as well as functionality for writing, posting and projecting. Consider rolling cabinets to serve as barriers and locations for storing school items.

Portable Toilets and Hand Washing Stations

For outdoor classrooms that lack easy access to indoor restrooms, consider a portable toilet and hand washing stations. Free-standing hand sanitizing stations come in all shapes and sizes and are an excellent alternative to sinks and soap.

High Touch and Personal Items

Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces at least daily or between uses as practicable and develop a schedule for increased, routine cleaning and disinfection. But perhaps most importantly, have users wash their hands before and after using shared objects. When possible, assign frequently touched items (like scissors or calculators) to each student for the duration of the class.

Screening and Grouping

Be aware that daily health screens and the use of small, stable groups in school are recommended.

Q&A

How do I manage safe bathroom use in my pod when I am teaching outside?

Establishing a pass system for using indoor classrooms allows for educators to remain outside while students use the indoor facilities. Make sure students know the rules of the road for how many students can be inside a bathroom at any given time. If possible, consider two portable toilet to serve your outdoor pod.

How should our outdoor classrooms be cleaned?

Like any classroom, high touch items should be cleaned frequently and if possible between uses. Being in the sunlight may provide some natural disinfection!

How should we organize safe travel to community partner sites, camps, or parks?

At this time, field trips to indoor locations that require travel are not recommended. Guidance for the safe travel of students is evolving, but travel by walking remains safer than travel with groups of students inside a vehicle.

Can students within my pod share any equipment or materials when we're outside?

Yes, students can share equipment with focus on hand sanitizing before and after touching or using shared equipment. It is important to remember that COVID-19 is primarily spread by respiratory droplets and potentially spread by touching an infected item with your hands and then touching your nose, mouth or eyes. Good hand hygiene can prevent the spread of viruses.

Are there types of common outdoor activities that I should avoid with my class?

*It is important to realized that singing, shouting or vigorous exercise can increase dispersal of respiratory droplets **up to 14 feet!** It would be best to move further apart when students do these activities or avoid these activities altogether if unable to distance.*