

OUTDOOR LEARNING CASE STUDY

RSU 89 – Katahdin Schools

Rural District · ~300 K-12 Students · Elementary School and Middle/High School · Serving Mount Chase, Patten, Sherman, and Stacyville, ME



Building a Culture of Outdoor Learning in a Rural District

Katahdin Schools have a culture of outdoor and nature-based learning that has been developing over several years. Superintendent Marie Robinson came to the district in 2016 with a passion for learning in nature and has worked diligently to support teachers with training and resources so they can make outdoor learning a reality. What began with English classes outside for nature journaling has expanded to include outdoor classrooms and outdoor education electives in both middle and high school.

Excitement from a few teachers quickly expanded district-wide through partnerships with community programs like the Maine Forest Collaborative and the Katahdin Learning Project. Superintendent Robinson attributes the district's enthusiasm for learning outside to patient adaptation, and the way outdoor learning has enabled teachers and students to break down barriers between subjects. Teachers work at their own pace, with the support they need, and invite their students into holistic learning that reflects the interconnectedness of life after school.

COVID-19 has accelerated outdoor learning in RSU 89 at a level that would have been unimaginable a year ago. A core planning team made up of teachers, administrators, and groundskeepers has been key to this success - each of the district's new outdoor learning initiatives has been driven and coordinated by this team. After an early experience with several tents being damaged by storms, the district built two permanent

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BENEFITS

- ✓ Academic gains
- ✓ Community connections
- ✓ Reduced need for behavioral plans
- ✓ Active and curious learning

TOOLS FOR CHANGE



An Outdoor Learning Planning Team



Community Volunteers



School Gear Library



Professional Development Opportunities

"I like learning outside because there's more space to learn!"

—Grade 2 Student



pavilions with removable sides using CARES Act funding. Elementary teachers have been teaching outdoors multiple days a week, while the music teacher held every class outdoors during the fall. A reduced school day has allowed time for teachers to engage in professional development on outdoor learning. Professional development from a local community partner, the Juniper Hill School, helped to build excitement and understanding among teachers about teaching outside, and inspired the core planning team to do an outdoor classroom site assessment on school grounds.

Community Support Magnifies Outdoor Learning Growth

This led to developing lower-cost outdoor learning spaces. Teachers and groundskeepers worked with community volunteers to prepare four new outdoor spaces, complete with stumps for seating, for kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade, and music. Students, teachers, and the groundskeeper cleared trails through the woods adjacent to the school, which will be a future community resource. In addition to outdoor classroom spaces, the elementary school built a school gear library with donations from local community organizations, parents, and funding support from the Maine Environmental Education Association and a crowdfunding campaign. In winter, outdoor learning will continue but will be more active and adventure based, with the indoors reserved for fine motor activities.

The expansion of outdoor learning has presented some challenges. As a rural district, safety during hunting season was a concern. In order to address potential risk, the planning team developed a multifaceted response including equipping all students with orange vests, posting school safety zone signs, and contacting local landowners about the presence of school children outdoors.

The district has seen tremendous benefits! Schools in the district have reported a significant reduction in the need for behavioral plans and disciplinary referrals, along with cross-curricular academic gains. Superintendent Robinson points to the organic growth of outdoor learning in the district as critical to its success - participation from teachers has been voluntary, with support available to those ready to make the leap. Perhaps most critical is the growing team of advocates who understand and actively advance the work, ensuring that outdoor learning gains made during COVID-19 will continue to develop after the pandemic passes.



COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS



Juniper Hill School
for Place Based Education



Rural Aspirations Project

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