

OUTDOOR LEARNING CASE STUDY

Georgetown Central School

Rural District • 40 Students • PreK-6th grade
Serving Georgetown, ME



Georgetown Central School has a culture of project- and place-based learning. For years, students studied tidepools at Reid State Park, worked in the school garden, and tended honeybees. Outdoor learning spaces abound—from preexisting school property green spaces to a town-owned nearby adventure trail to a beaver pond across the street. The school borders the town transfer station, as well as the tidal inlets and forests of the Josephine Newman Sanctuary. The beach, marsh and forest trail system of Reid State Park are also near. This public elementary school was well-positioned to pivot to nature-based, outdoor learning as a response to COVID-19.

Community members and school administrators alike have supported the development of outdoor learning in 2020. Principal Nina Willette supports teacher conversations about outdoor learning, gathers equipment and resources, and seeks out professional development opportunities. Over the summer, some teachers, parents, the principal, and other community members established the Outdoor Learning Committee. Two of the teachers on that committee attended the “Teaching With Nature” institute of the Juniper Hill School, a nearby early childhood nature-based school.

In August, the Outdoor Learning Committee held a work day at the school to create outdoor learning spaces. After a landscape company cleared an area to make it functional for outdoor learning, staff members and families created several outdoor classrooms, brought in

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TOOLS FOR CHANGE



An Outdoor Learning Planning Team



Community Partners and Volunteers



School Gear Library and Donations



Professional Development Opportunities



Outdoor Infrastructure
(shelter, seating, blackboards, play areas, etc.)

*"I like it at school because it's like I'm learning at home but **the outside is bigger.**"*

—Aiden

BENEFITS



Student engagement and enthusiasm



Behavior is prosocial



Academics and play are connected



Recentering breaks easy outdoors



Academic gains (writing and science specifically)



a shed for storage of materials, and built a timber frame shelter in the woods behind the school.

Outdoor classrooms—built to accommodate a variety of needs and activities—make outdoor learning manageable. Depending on the space, classrooms include blackboards and stump seats for lessons, cocoon swings or hammocks for independent reading/resting, and space for exploration. The administration supports teachers trying various approaches to teaching outdoors and interacting with nature, including project-based learning.

When the seasons change, outdoor learning requires more layers. With help from the Georgetown Island Educational Foundation, Coronavirus Relief Fund, and private donations, the school acquired clothing—including orange hats, wool socks, rain pants, and boots—and other outdoor gear like tea thermoses. The school is working to set up systems for lending and storing gear and clothing.

One concern with the cold weather is an increased number of inside-outside transitions, or issues with students' clothing or gear, and a resulting potential decrease in learning time. Plus, preparing lessons can take more time when planning to teach outdoors, which can present a challenge coupled with reduced teacher prep time due to playground COVID-19 regulations.

Making sure teachers have the training for risk-based teaching outdoors is critical; the school is addressing this novel need for professional development including onsite workshops with Anne Stires from Juniper Hill School.

Teachers and students are experiencing what outdoor opportunities can offer: inquiry, physical fitness, and social connections. "Learning outdoors feels like such an opportunity. Kids want to be outdoors—and so do the teachers—for the space, the safety, and creativity," said Principal Willette. One teacher noticed that the gender-segregated play that they witness on the playground doesn't happen in the natural, outdoor classrooms.

Georgetown Central School is beginning to see outdoor learning as an approach for teaching in the future, too. From dissecting acorns in a wooded classroom and shrieking in delight at discovering weevils, to reading and writing poetry by the river, Georgetown Central School students and teachers are finding new ways to bring life to their lessons.

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"It's different because we have a new area in the woods."

—Ruby



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for Place Based Education

