

OUTDOOR LEARNING CASE STUDY

Portland Public Schools

Urban District · 17 Schools · 6,750 Prek-12 Students
50+ Languages spoken · 53% eligible for free & reduced lunch

Providing Equity & Opportunity Across Maine's Largest Urban District

For years, Portland's seventeen schools have engaged in outdoor education initiatives that varied vastly based on individual teacher and administrator capacity and time. Some elementary classrooms learned about animal habitats and bird migration with [Maine Audubon](#), while others participated in garden-based education with [Cultivating Community](#) and [FoodCorps](#). The [School Ground Greening Coalition](#) worked with each school independently over time to create outdoor classrooms, trails, gardens, and natural gathering spaces. The only program that directly reached every child was the outdoor adventure and youth leadership organization [Rippleffect](#), with established programs at each middle school.

By 2020, the idea of using outdoor spaces was not entirely new, but only a very small subset of teachers had regularly taught outdoors.

As Portland Public Schools (PPS) leadership worked on a Fall 2020 opening plan, parents, teachers, school board members, and community advocates recommended outdoor learning. The strategy was appealing for COVID-19 safety reasons, as well as for its mental health and educational benefits. PPS used design templates from [Green Schoolyards America](#), and design professional support from the [Portland Society for Architecture \(PSA\)](#) to create site plans for designated outdoor classroom spots.

PPS leadership made a commitment to support outdoor learning; the district used CARES Act funding strategically to finance school outdoor classrooms and materials, and increase designated outdoor learning staff. The district shifted STEM Coordinator Brooke Teller's role to district Outdoor Learning Coordinator, and Teller hired a stipended Outdoor Learning Liaison at each school to coordinate outdoor learning, distribute resources, and set up classroom space. The district also purchased outdoor learning materials

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BENEFITS

- ✓ Sparks student's natural curiosity
- ✓ Shared and equitable experience
- ✓ Student engagement is high
- ✓ Decrease in behavioral challenges

TOOLS FOR CHANGE



District Outdoor Learning Coordinator



Outdoor Learning Liaisons at each school



Existing Relationships with Outdoor Ed. Organizations



Outdoor Gear to Ensure Equitable Access



Professional Development



“Community advocates and partners are essential to this work, and so is having a supportive district administration that is ready to jump in and take a risk, because this is not something we had done on such a large scale before.”

—Brooke Teller, Outdoor Learning Coordinator, Portland Public Schools

including buckets (for use as seats), learning kits (bag, clipboard, and pen), whiteboards, outdoor storage bins, rolling file carts, and student winter gear.

Community members helped too: from parents and local businesses donating stumps and carpet squares and volunteering their time to set up, to the Local Carpenters Local 349 (in conjunction with United Way) building 12 easels per school in the district, to the Foundation for Portland Public Schools raising \$7100 in its Outdoor Teaching and Learning Fund to allow the district to speedily purchase additional materials and bridge equity gaps.

The Outdoor Learning Coordinators are key to the equitable distribution of support for outdoor learning across the district. Because of diverse school cultures and varying physical site characteristics, outdoor learning presents different opportunities and challenges at each school.

Several schools use adjacent city park space for classes. Students at Peaks Island School go on snowshoe learning adventures. At Lyseth Elementary, students in the outdoor art class create weavings, ice sun catchers, and nature mobiles for a Forest Art Museum alongside a hiking trail. Portland Arts and Technology High School students study carpentry outside. And at Talbot Community School, second graders learn about how animals respond to cold weather.

Training & Professional Development

To train and support teachers, Teller worked with partners at Cultivating Community and an outdoor learning consultant to create a training video with outdoor learning strategies and advice. As winter approached, teachers received additional training opportunities from Juniper Hill School and Maine Audubon.

The district is aware of challenges and limitations in its foray into outdoor learning this year. Many middle and high school teachers have chosen to stay inside, citing the lack of outdoor wifi. The district will look to improve outdoor wifi in the future. PPS set up Transformit fabric shelters at each school to facilitate outdoor teaching. After experiencing the structures' limitations during the winter, Teller plans to investigate more durable and permanent shelters. And because 2020-2021 has been an exceptional year, the schools can't count on the infusion of outside funding moving forward. But they are committed to securing additional support, and will likely apply to the state Rethinking Remote Education Ventures (RREV) grant.

Many PPS teachers want to continue teaching outside in the future, even in a post-COVID world. Teller is creating new curriculum for preK-5 with embedded outdoor learning components. Having experienced the benefits firsthand, district and building leaders are committed to providing outdoor educational experiences to students in the future.

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“We have students with varying language needs. The beauty of coming outdoors is that it’s an access point for all learners.”

—Cindy Soule, Talbot Community School,
2021 Maine Teacher of the Year



COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Outdoor Classrooms:

United Way/Carpenters Local 349
Portland Society for Architecture
School PTOs
Foundation for Portland Public Schools

Student/School Support:

Cultivating Community
Maine Audubon
Maine Environmental Education
Association
Many more

Professional Development:

Juniper Hill
Maine Audubon