



## Strategies for Advancing Outdoor Education

Across the country and world, communities are taking steps to advance outdoor education from a “nice-to-have” amenity for few to an equitable system used to address some of the most poignant challenges facing youth and education today. This overview focuses on some of the ideas, programs, and successes around promoting outdoor education for all in various communities. Information is also included on existing initiatives in Nevada.

### Arkansas

The [Joint Use Agreement Grant Program](#) is a competitive grant process facilitated by the state Department of Education in Arkansas. Awardees receive funding and technical assistance to develop joint use agreements. These agreements maximize the use of recreation resources and facilities for cities, towns, and schools through shared costs, responsibilities, and spaces. This program aims to combat childhood obesity and sedentary lifestyles by increasing accessible opportunities for outdoor recreation. Learn how this program helped reduce obesity rates by 7% in just one year [here](#). A similar program is also established in California with the [San Diego Play All Day Partnership](#). There, joint-use agreements allow the city to maximize the school district lands for the public in park-deficient communities.

### California

[The Cool Schools Act](#) of California requires school sites to develop extreme heat action plans, which must include accessible school yards with shade trees and mini forests, school gardens, and green barriers between schools and adjacent sites. This bill aims to combat urban heat islands through [green schoolyard](#) infrastructure. Similarly, the [California Schoolyard Forest System](#) initiative aims to transform unshaded, asphalt schoolyards in high need areas with shade trees, curriculum to be used within the schoolyards, and an environmental literacy focus.

### Colorado

Like several other states, Colorado has an outdoor education and recreation grant, the [Outdoor Equity Grant](#) program, which focuses on supporting equitable opportunity to experience and develop skills in the outdoors for youth (through age 25) and their families in underrepresented communities. In the programs first round in 2021, \$750,000 was distributed across Colorado. That total is on a schedule to grow to \$3 million annually by 2024.

### Georgia

In Georgia, the Environmental Educational Alliance (EEA), born of a 1990 legislative council, and the EEA-directed Council for Outdoor Learning developed a [CoOL Toolkit](#) for schools and teachers looking to create outdoor learning spaces and incorporate environmental education. This toolkit includes outdoor



oriented activities, guides on schoolyard planning, easy approaches to get students and teachers comfortable with outdoor learning, classroom management tips, and more.

## Missouri

The [Little Creek Nature Area](#) is owned and operated by the Ferguson-Florissant School District. On this 97-acre property are domestic livestock, a natural playground, a pond, a creek, trails, and more. Schools utilize the onsite classrooms and equipment, and get to participate in ongoing stewardship of the space through hands programs in ecology, environmental science, field biology, living history, and high school level trade workforce development classes. The park is also used for professional development, summer camps and other community-based activities. Dedicated outdoor and field science teachers on site can provide expert support in outdoor education.

## Nebraska

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission hosts a comprehensive [Legacy in Environmental Education Discovery](#) teacher training course at a different part of the state each year that they've designated as a "Biologically Unique Landscape". The goal is to expose teachers to the different natural areas in the state and train them on unique species and features of the areas so they can bring that knowledge back to their classrooms.

## New Mexico

Capacity building for outdoor education is a focus in New Mexico. In 2023, the New Mexico legislature introduced [a bill](#) to fund two positions within the Department of Education, an Outdoor Learning Specialist and an Outdoor Learning Assistant, as well as funding for outdoor education professional development and materials. Maine has proposed a similar position, a Green Schools Coordinator, within their Department of Education.

## Oregon

Oregon is facilitating immersive outdoor experiences for all students through the [Outdoor School](#) program. This program enables 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade students across the state to spend up to a week in an overnight outdoor education and camping experience at various sites [across Oregon](#). These 5th and 6th grade students are led in part by high school counselors as [they study soils, plants, animals, and water](#). This adds diversity to these younger students' educations engaging them in learning, and provides an opportunity for high school students to get involved with both an outdoor education and leadership experience. A grant program run through Oregon State University Outdoor School Extension as well as a nonprofit partner support this experience with over \$46 million in funding for outdoor school, transportation funds, outdoor school sites and provider information. OSU Extensions also offers tools for schools and educators, including ready-to-use outdoor education curriculum and professional development.



In 2009, the Oregon Legislature established a task force charged with creating the [Oregon Environmental Literacy Plan \(OELP\)](#), which was then enacted by the legislature in 2010. This plan enables implementation of place-based outdoor learning with curriculum specified for every discipline and grade level. Run through the Oregon State University Extension as well, OELP aligns outdoor activities with standards, bridges schools and the larger community for common educational goals, and disseminates research-based models and practices to educators.

The [2020 Governor’s Task Force on Outdoor Education](#) has also recommended developing a statewide PreK-12 outdoor education plan to build on the existing programs, but with a focus on youth outdoor recreation time and participation, rather than on attainment of standards.

## Utah

[Utah’s Every Kid Outdoors Initiative](#), created by the [state legislature](#) in 2019, encourages youth and their families to get outside and get active through ten outdoor activities, including “Follow a trail”, “Experience The Greatest Snow on Earth”, and “Observe nature and wildlife in Utah”. This initiative echoes [efforts in states and cities nationwide](#), which outline key outdoor experiences of the area, and which are often called a “Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights”.

## Virginia

A [2024 bill](#) in Virginia proposes a state grant program administered by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. This competitive grant program would assist selected school districts in developing local student environmental literacy plans with guidance and consultation from the Department of Education to ensure compliance within the state environmental literacy plan.

## Washington

In 2021, Washington State established [Outdoor Learning Grants](#), providing Outdoor School for all to students in 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade. This program is in addition to the [No Child Left Inside](#) grant program. In 2022, these two programs distributed \$6.3 million in state general funds to outdoor education and recreation for youth.

Washington has been a leader in including preschool and PreK students in the outdoor education ecosystem, as the first state to [license outdoor preschool](#) programs, making them eligible for state funding and increasing accessibility to families in need of childcare support. This also provides provision for standardization.

Beginning in the 2024/25 school year, all public schools in the state will be required to provide a minimum of [30 minutes of daily recess](#) for all elementary students, as outlined in [SB 5257](#). The law also protects recess by discouraging recess withholding for disciplinary or academic reasons and encouraging physical activity breaks for older students.



## Peru

Asociación para la Niñez y su Ambiente or ANIA (Association for Children and their Environment) in Peru developed a methodology known as [Tierra de Niños](#) (Children's Lands) to connect children to nature and give them empowering stewardship opportunities. In Children's Lands, kids plan, implement, and care for the outdoor spaces where they live, learn, and play. The Ministry of Education adopted the methodology in Peru and the program has been replicated in other South American countries.

The methodology relies on three pillars: Every school has nature within, Children have access to that nature, and nature is recognized and respected as a teacher.

Read more international case studies on outdoor learning [here](#).

Track unfolding legislation that supports outdoor engagement [here](#).

## Nevada

In Lander County, the [school district](#) received funding through a one-time funding opportunity, the [Nevada Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure](#) (NORI) grant, to renovate the Battle Mountain High School duck pond and improve accessibility to the area for students, seniors, and the entire community. Students at Battle Mountain High School are involved in this renovation process, [educating the community on the environmental effects](#) of introduced species to the pond through the Animal Science class.

Galena High School in Washoe County is creating a [new program](#) called Outdoor Academy in partnership with local organizations like Truckee Meadows Community College, UNR, and Sky Tavern Ski Resort. The course may include certifications and classes in hunter safety, wildland firefighting, wilderness first aid, and more for those students who thrive in experiential courses over traditional classroom settings.

Across Nevada, the following outdoor education and recreation initiatives are in place:

- Nevada State Park passes are free of charge for 5<sup>th</sup> grade students and their families and are available for all to check out at libraries across the state. Library passes, rolled out at the start of 2023, have quickly become a high demand item with long waitlists.
- The [Nevada Outdoor Education & Recreation](#) (NOER) grant program, created by the legislature in 2019 and funded for the first two rounds in 2023 and 2024, funds outdoor education and recreation programming for students through age 18, but requires future funding.
- Local community groups, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations across Nevada support youth recreation and environmental education in their communities. The school-focused programs facilitated by these entities are catalogued in NDOR's Statewide Programs & Curricula resource.
- Funding for development and maintenance of school gardens as outlined in [SB244](#).