

NEWS

This Delaware school embraced outdoor education before COVID-19. Can others follow suit?

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It's a scene typical of any elementary classroom. A group of first graders sits in a circle for an English lesson, chanting out their classmates' names and learning how to count the syllables in words.

But instead of the usual classroom walls, covered in bulletin boards and posters, the students and their teacher are surrounded by trees. Carpeted floors are replaced by a dirt clearing, riddled with roots and fallen leaves. Instead of desks, the students sit on stumps sawed into stools, cut to meet their short statures.

This is an outdoor classroom at St. Anne's Episcopal School in Middletown. Over the past four years, the school has grown its outdoor education program for preschool and prekindergarten students, with the goal of having students spend at least an hour outside every day.

While trying to plan for a fall semester filled with new health regulations, the school saw an opportunity: expand the outdoor program up to its oldest eighth grade students.

The pandemic has pushed education in two directions. Schools' reliance on technology vaulted into the future as teachers were forced to learn how to teach classes online.

And for schools that figured out in-person learning, classrooms feel like they've been pushed back 50 years. Flexible seating and collaborative small-group work, which have become common practice in modern classrooms, have been replaced by single desks in spaced out rows to ensure social distancing.

Outdoor education and the "magic of being in the woods" offer a healthier alternative to both the seemingly endless screen time of virtual learning and now-stripped classrooms, said

Kerry Wilson, St. Anne's director of outdoor education.

Wilson hopes St. Anne's woodsy classrooms can serve as a model for other schools improvising ways to increase face-to-face learning during a pandemic. She hopes outdoor education can extend beyond immediate pandemic needs as well.

"Children are really craving that connection to the outdoors," Wilson said. "If we're going to save our environment, we need to connect this next generation to the natural world. Because if we don't, they're not going to want to fight for it."

GUIDANCE FROM THE SUMMER: Delaware releases guidance for reopening schools, if students return

Inside, students and teachers still follow state guidelines. Masks are required and desks are spaced out. But classes are encouraged to spend as much time as they can in the school's 27 outdoor classrooms scattered in pockets of woods throughout campus.

Down a short path from the first-grade clearing, a group of preschoolers explore their own patch of woods. One sits by a stump, picking away at bark to discover the layers of wood below. Another hoists himself between the low-hanging branches of a tree, weighing whether or not he'll make the short jump.

"When you're outside, there's that opportunity for creativity and imaginative play," Wilson said. "It gives you a break from electronics and the chance for unexpected learning," whether it's from spotting a new bug on the ground or listening to different bird calls.

When the state released its school reopening guidance in July, one of the suggestions was for schools to use outdoor spaces as much as possible. Many schools have followed that recommendation, taking advantage of bleachers and open fields to give students a chance to space out and take a break from wearing masks.

Like many private schools across the country, St. Anne's saw a temporary dip in enrollment early in the summer, as parents waited to see if students would be allowed back on campus in the fall.

In June, fall enrollment was at 140 students. But once the school released its plan for in-person learning — and increased outdoor education programming — more families joined, totaling 240 students at the start of the year, said Matt Goetting, St. Anne's associate head of school for advancement.

“The ability of our faculty to pivot to longer and more frequent time outside has absolutely increased interest in our program in a big way,” Goetting said.

Back to school, kind of: Inside Delaware education's unusual hybrid return

With the goal of keeping nature as intact as possible, a team of 30 people with chainsaws, weed whackers and more carved out 18 new outdoor classrooms over the course of three nights, Wilson said.

The school amassed about 150 stumps for seating over the summer and supplied each outdoor classroom with chalkboards built to withstand any weather.

Outdoor learning happens rain or shine, Wilson said. As part of their school uniform, students need to have rain pants, boots and a raincoat. With the weather turning cooler, Wilson emailed parents with tips on proper layering so students can still learn comfortably outside.

Students in outdoor classrooms have caught glimpses of beavers and turtles in a lake on campus. It isn't unusual for kids to become engrossed in a worm squirming in front of their feet or bees flitting between flowers.

Each of those encounters with nature is a chance for learning, Wilson said.

“There's a lot of missed opportunities by not stepping outside the door,” Wilson said. “What are we teaching? And if it is connected to nature, why aren't we going outside?”

Bringing the outdoors to everyone

In Delaware, the emergence of outdoor education programs is fairly recent. Schools might have nature trails or community gardens for students to learn from, but don't dedicate most of the day to using those spaces, said Katie Pollock, a master teacher at the University of Delaware Lab School.

The Lab School has run an outdoor preschool class for four years. The program has grown as more parents have been convinced of the benefits of learning outside, Pollock said. COVID-19 and figuring out how to safely reenter schools have fueled that interest. This year, the school added three more outdoor classrooms.

“All areas of development are being strengthened and supported in a much richer, more multi-sensory environment than a typical classroom,” Pollock said. “We need to make sure that families understand that their children are going to get wet and they might be a little

uncomfortable, but that through that, they're building resiliency and the idea that we can go outside no matter what the weather is."

The benefits of outdoor learning are all-encompassing, Pollock said. Constantly moving all day builds muscles, motor skills and coordination. Studies show that students who are outside longer sleep better at night and have better focus when completing assignments.

Teachers at St. Anne's have noticed students' behavior improve when in the outdoor classrooms. Outside, there are no toys to fight over. Instead, students are more likely to work together helping each other climb trees or step over rocks.

Students who normally don't enjoy learning in the classroom are able to thrive outdoors, Wilson said.

Studies have also shown that increased time learning outdoors improves test scores. Both Wilson and Pollock pointed to that as a reason to expand outdoor learning throughout the state.

Most kids in Delaware don't have the luxury of being able to afford a private school like St. Anne's, Wilson said. Her ultimate hope is to be able to replicate outdoor classrooms in public and private schools across the state.

"When you look at a lot of outdoor education programs, it's all white people," Wilson said. "White, privileged kids have the exposure to outdoor education. It's really about diversifying that programming and making it accessible to everyone."

Accessibility to the outdoors could take a number of shapes. Urban gardens and beekeeping projects offer options for city schools surrounded by concrete. Partnerships with local parks give students a dedicated place to learn outside, much like the wooded classrooms at St. Anne's.

'WE WANT CHOICE': Parents urge Appoquinimink to offer full-time in-person option

Ensuring that kids from lower-income neighborhoods have equitable access to the outdoors is possible, Pollock said, but it takes money and support from government agencies.

"This isn't fair that only these children get this experience. It's not enough," Pollock said. "We need attention at the government level to help with the funding and the resources that are needed to make it happen."

Over the course of a school year, Wilson watches her students adapt to the outdoors. Kindergarteners overcome their fears of traversing rocks. Hikes with preschoolers become shorter as the students find themselves able to walk faster.

Wilson said it gives her chills — and it's something she wants all students to experience.

“Confidence is being gained, knowledge is being built, relationships are being forged,” Wilson said. “At the heart of education is community and raising students’ self-confidence. If you have that, and they feel secure, then they’ll be able to learn.”

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