

Management Tips for Taking Your Classroom Outdoors

Refer to your school grounds as a living laboratory or outdoor classroom with your students and administrators.

When referring to the outdoors in this manner with your students, you are reflecting the goals of the outdoor space and students can begin to transform how they think about the space as well. Referring in this manner with administrators and referencing the standards to be addressed helps pave the way to obtaining permission for using school grounds to support instruction.

Believe in your students.

ALL students, from the highest achieving to the most challenged, can work outdoors. Resist the temptation to use outdoor work as a reward for good behavior. Communicate a belief that working outdoors is simply part of everyday class work. Your students may well surprise you.

Remember that learning looks different outdoors.

Student voices are often louder and their body movements tend to be larger outdoors as excitement is likely to be high and expressed more physically than in the indoor classroom. Students may move around more frequently to share what they found with others. Encourage them to talk to each other about what they find.

Keep students accountable to behavioral expectations.

Consider the rules, best practices, and consequences in your indoor classroom setting. How can you adapt what you do for behaviors inside your indoor classroom for outside? The overall expectations don't change because students went outside. Consider an outdoor classroom agreement (see more under "Safety").

Establish a well-defined purpose for going outside and the outdoor parameters before going outside.

Be sure students understand the specific tasks that are to be accomplished and the boundaries of the space where they are to complete their work.

Plan Ahead.

Once you have administrative permission to take learning outside, it is important that you feel comfortable and confident when you take the students outdoors. Before you go out with the students, scout the area. This includes walking the area, considering possible stopping points, determining features could you point out, how you will set up the special boundaries for the activity, etc.

Try doing this once a season during the school year as well (even grassy schoolyards change with the seasons), not just when you already have an activity planned. Allow the school yard to spark ideas of how you can tie what you are learning to an outdoor schoolyard experience.

Practice, practice, practice.

At first, choose short excursions with a single focus to practice behavior expectations (as a group, we are going to look for 5 examples of weathering). Students will learn quickly that the outdoors is simply an extension of your classroom. Over time, make excursions longer and with more student independence from the group. This



will help build trust and allow you to address anything that comes up quickly before sending students further out into the school grounds. Plus, the more you go out, the easier it gets.

Anticipate Student Concerns and Consider Accessibility.

Address any fears of being outside before going outside. What is your flying insect protocol (it's not flailing about or swatting at the insect...those are the best ways to get stung). Have a small backpack with extra supplies for the lesson, pencils, first aid kit, and anything else you might think useful.

Know the accessibility of your students and their comfortability levels for the outdoors. Discuss the activity beforehand with students with accessibility concerns, what do they need from you to feel comfortable learning in the schoolyard?

Get help.

Invite community workers, school/parent volunteers, specialists, and administrators to join in your activities and work with the students. Outline specific ways they can help, what authority they have while outdoors and when they should request your assistance.

Model respect for living things.

Emphasize that all living things, plants, animals, fungi are to be respected and preferably not disturbed. If organisms are collected be sure they are returned back to their original location. In terms of gathering items, use the "1 in 20 Rule." Collect a plant only if more than 20 of the same species are growing in the immediate area. This applies to parts of plants as well- 1 leaf from a shrub with at least 20 leaves). If collecting animals (vertebrates or invertebrates) be sure to follow all district, county, and [state level](#) safety protocols and permitting. Leave No Trace also applies here- be sure students bring everything back inside with them that they took outside.

Set up exit and entry routines and don't forget about the transition.

Just as you have routines for starting class inside consider establishing routines for transitioning to your outdoor classroom. What is the routine before exiting the indoor classroom? What will the students need to pick up each time? Where do they return items on the way back in? What is the routine for coming back together as a group before entering the building? Where will the group come back together? How will you call students back to this place (whistle?)?

Students will also need a few minutes to settle into the outdoor learning environment and begin their tasks, just as they would moving from one teacher's indoor classroom to the next. The outdoor environment naturally makes students more alert and curious, new sights, sounds, etc. Build in some time to allow students to take in these things so they can then focus on the task at hand.

Stay flexible.

Nature can be unpredictable. You might take the class outside and a student finds a really cool looking insect. Your lesson gets derailed for 10 minutes while everyone takes a look and asks you questions you might not know the answer to. Sometimes saying "I'm not sure what kind of insect that is; how can we find out?" leads to an even deeper learning than you originally planned.



Safety.

Before heading outside for the first time and every time:

- .: Review student medical records for allergies, asthma, bee-sting reactions, and any other health conditions before heading outdoors. Discuss student health concerns with the nurse before taking students outside and have a plan just in case. Also be sure to talk with the nurse and administrators for any school or division specific protocols for injuries.
- .: Have a small backpack with extra supplies for the lesson, pencils, first aid kit, and anything else you might think useful. Some schools may require you to take a radio or your cell phone for communication.
- .: Review any pertinent outdoor classroom rules. At the beginning of the year, consider a class agreement for how students should interact with each other and their environment while outside. The contract could include ideas such as: leave no trace, stay on trails, do not pick up live animals or plants unless our activity calls for it, etc. Include student input on the content of the contract.
- .: Remind students to report any bites, stings, slips, trips, and falls to the you immediately.
- .: Monitor the weather and have a backup lesson just in case.
- .: Point out any hazards before you get started (ant hills, noxious plants, etc.).
- .: Demonstrate how to safely turn over a rock or log toward yourself to provide a safe escape for an animal to move away from you.
- .: Provide safety equipment like gloves, tweezers, aspirators, etc. for collecting organisms.

During the activity

- .: Students should be careful where they walk as they ground will be uneven and there could be something like an anthill which they would not want to step on.
- .: Students should be sure they are not leaving any equipment behind as they move around the outdoor space
- .: Walk around to monitor student progress on the task

Post activity

- .: Always wash hands when returning to the school building.
- .: Account for all equipment students took outdoors

After the activity

Returning to the group to close out an activity is important but don't forget to check in with your students after the outdoor activity to have them evaluate their experience in the outdoor classroom. In regards to being in the outdoor classroom space, ask them what worked and what didn't. Have them explain why and offer reasonable solutions. Nothing like talking a class to a cool spot in the school yard for weeks and then getting feedback that every time you had the students positioned so they were staring in the sun the whole time and therefore distracted while you were talking.

Always close an outdoor activity by reinforcing the concept being studied. Have students explain how what they found outside reinforces the concept and what new questions they may have. Many times students are so excited about being outside that they have completely forgotten the purpose for going outdoors!



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