

## Outdoor school [proposal](#): Health care considerations

As stated in the Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics (WCAAP) [statement](#) on school reopening, given that educating in outdoor settings offers a safer physical environment for children and teachers during the pandemic, school districts should strongly consider moving as many activities outdoors as possible.

Time spent in a school setting with peers and educators provides students with social and emotional development, meals and exercise, mental health support, and other resources that can't be easily replicated in a virtual learning environment; moreover, many families' work demands and incomes may prohibit giving their children adequate structure or educational support, no matter parents' strong desires to advance their children's academic and overall growth. While full time in-person school may not be advisable at this time due to high levels of community transmission of COVID-19, efforts to bridge the gap with creative solutions like outdoor school will benefit children.

There is very good evidence that transmission of COVID-19 is less likely in outdoor environments, and studies show that time spent outdoors benefits children's physical health, school achievement, and overall wellbeing. Learning and playing outdoors can lead to improved focus, impulse control, creativity, empathy and motor skill development, and reduced obesity, aggression, stress and depression.

### Precautions

Proposals for outdoor education must take into consideration the preventive health measures we know to be effective to protect students, staff and the community from COVID-19 infection, including:

- Physical distancing, optimally 6 feet or 3-6 feet when 6 feet is not possible;
- Face coverings; and
- Good hygiene practices, including access to running water for handwashing.
- Reduced group sizes to **cohorts** of no more than 5-9 students in pre-K – Kindergarten, 10–15 students from 1<sup>st</sup> grade – 12<sup>th</sup> grade;
- To minimize transmission, it is important that student **cohorts** be constant and not intermingling, eg the same 10-15 students remain together each day, each week, each month.
- To minimize transmission, we also recommend that teachers interact with limited numbers of cohorts each day, each week, each month.
  - We recognize this presents significant limitations especially for middle and high schoolers. We believe that in-person time together with peers and educators is paramount, and encourage educators to work creatively to implement hybrid models that can help accommodate diverse subject matter and academic levels while also providing for in-person time with peers and teachers (in cohorts which prevent spread of the virus.)

With these precautions in place, it is our position that outdoor school can present a safer setting for education even as our knowledge of the disease process in children evolves.

Though not COVID-specific, the Washington State Department of Children, Youth and Families (DCYF) Outdoor Preschool [Standards](#) offers a framework for developing health and safety standards for outdoor education and may prove useful as schools and school districts consider their own outdoor programs.

### **Children with Disabilities and or Special Health Care Needs**

Students with disabilities may have a difficult time transitioning back to school and participating in an outdoor program may pose new challenges. We recommend reviewing the needs of each child with an individualized education program (IEP) before they return to school. Medications and health care plans must be on site for students with special health care needs, and school personnel and or responsible allied organizations' personnel need to be familiar with accessing the plans, as well as have appropriate support for administering medications or treatments.

### **Children's Emotional and Behavioral Needs**

Schools should anticipate and be prepared to address a wide range of mental health and emotional needs of children when schools reopen, including in outdoor settings. The emotional impact of the pandemic, including the loss of family members, financial difficulties, social isolation, and growing concerns about systemic racial inequity — coupled with prolonged limited access to critical school-based support and assistance of school professionals — demands careful attention and preparation for school personnel. Students may have difficulty with the social and emotional aspects of transitioning back into the school setting, especially in an unfamiliar outdoor environment. Special considerations are warranted for students with pre-existing anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions; children with a prior history of trauma or loss; and students who may be particularly sensitive to disruptions in routine. Teachers need training and assistance to support children's emotional needs during the pandemic, including how to handle acting-out behaviors in an outdoor setting. We urge schools to implement trauma-informed approaches to support children's underlying emotions and unmet needs to advance safe learning environments and prevent discipline of students who may be in the greatest need of support.

### **Transportation**

We recognize that getting students to outdoor school locations presents unique transportation challenges given the level of contagion of COVID-19 and urge schools to consider models such as "safe routes to school" and "walking school buses" to allow children to get to school safely, especially when they have parents working outside the home, while also minimizing exposure to the virus.

###

### **About the Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics**

The Washington Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics represents over 1100 pediatric health



care providers from across Washington State. Our mission is to optimize the health and well-being of children and their families while advancing pediatric care.

**About BestStart Washington**

Founded and governed by pediatricians, BestStart Washington collaborates with community pediatricians, families and other partners to develop and fund innovative programs that give children the best possible start on healthy and productive lives. Our current emphasis – Project Nature- helps children connect, discover, and play in nature: [www.projectnaturewa.com](http://www.projectnaturewa.com).