

WISCONSIN SCHOOL GARDEN INITIATIVE BRIEF:

OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS FOR SCHOOL-AGE LEARNERS



**Wisconsin
Partnership Program**
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
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Digging for worms, manipulating waterways, and exploring our surroundings know no age limit. Outdoor classrooms are ripe with opportunities for students of all ages to better understand and engage in the world around them. This brief outlines the benefits of outdoor classrooms, suggests elements to include when designing one, and highlights one Wisconsin school that has successfully expanded its classroom learning beyond the school's four walls.

Benefits of Outdoor Classrooms

Students as naturalists –

Outdoor classrooms offer hosts of natural elements for student to observe through hands-on, direct experiences.



Students as collaborators –

Outdoor classrooms create opportunities for social interaction and cooperation.

Students as explorers –

Outdoor classrooms promote and celebrate student curiosity, problem-solving, and discovery.

Students as citizens –

Outdoor classrooms teach stewardship of the schoolyard that paves the way for understanding larger neighborhood and community contexts.

Outdoor Classroom Components

Outdoor classrooms are as different as the schools where they can be found. Use these general considerations as a guide, but be inspired and informed by the audience the outdoor classroom will serve. Solicit ideas from students, staff, and the community.

- **Start with what you've got.** Plan to incorporate steams, meadows, woods, or other natural areas that already exist on or near your school building. Before purchasing new items, inventory equipment like handheld lens, clipboards, nets, and collection jars the school owns that could be useful in the outdoor classroom.
- **Build a gathering place.** Even outdoors, teachers and students need a place to gather to share information. Benches or stumps that are easily moved allows classes to rearrange the space as needed.
- **Maintain pathways.** Accessibility to and within the outdoor classroom will ensure that all students can safely participate in the space. Develop a plan for building and maintaining these paths.
- **Celebrate the classrooms' habitats and inhabitants.** Teach respectful observation and examination of the plants and animals that live in the classroom. Research specific species and their habitat preferences. Identify the species you see and search for clues for the species you don't see. Track plant growth and animal populations from year to year. Above all, celebrate the plants, birds, butterflies, reptiles, mammals, and more that share your outdoor classroom with you!

High Marq Environmental Charter School

Located in rural Montello, High Marq Environmental Charter School offers project-based learning opportunities with an environmental focus for students in grades 7-12. High Marq students partake in field days that bring them outside for a full day in nature every week, all year long. Activities range from canoeing to landscaping, but all are student-directed and many rely on community partnerships. Read on to learn why teacher, Amanda Bolan, and her students, think all students should have time to learn outdoors.

From the teacher...

Amanda Bolan has seen her students, and her schoolyard, blossom with proper time outside. Last year, a group of students planned and planted a garden completely under their own direction. Different tasks were assigned, including a group for aesthetics and another for summer care. This year, the group already looks forward to their time in the garden and even as the snow starts to fall, have started discussions about new gardening methods and plants to consider in spring.

What does a teacher need to do to support the confidence, problem-solving, and leadership required for student-directed projects like starting a garden? "Be brave. Take them outside," Amanda says.

While some teachers might initially be intimidated by the shift away from traditional classroom-based learning, Amanda reminds us of the important benefits. Time outside helps teach students to be stewards of the environment. High Marq students see the positive impact their actions have on the land surrounding their school and community. And as the land prospers, so do the students. As Amanda tells it, "If you want to see students learn, if you want to see them care about each other and to grow, you have to take them outside."



High Marq students interviewed:
Joseph Dedrick, Emmett Wiegell, Aletha Hefko, Steven Anderson, and Allison Foster

And her students.

Five High Marq students sit around a table calmly describing the flesh-eating beetles they use to clean skulls delivered by a partner at the DNR. The beetles are just one example of the hands-on projects the students say keep them involved in the natural world. Other examples are equally easy to relay... and equally impressive. When discussing a canoeing trip earlier in the year, one student remembers being struck as she looked around, "I saw people helping people, people getting over their fears, and people having a blast. And we were learning."

The classroom at High Marq may look different than other schools, but the focus on meaningful learning is as recognizable as at any other school. Case in point, the students' discussion about their role in solving global issues. Mentioning recycling and teaching through blogs, High Marq students say they focus on "what we can do here and now to make things better." Still need proof that these students are prepared to be global citizens? Go visit on field day: "Bring them along. Because we can't convince them with just words."

Resources

LEAF's School Grounds Handbook:

<http://www.uwsp.edu/cnr-ap/leaf/SiteAssets/Pages/Develop-Your-Site/School%20Grounds%20Development%20Handbook.pdf>

Natural Learning Initiatives, NC State University:

<http://naturalllearning.org/nli-infosheets>

Developing an Outdoor Classroom..., UTENN:

<http://fsc.fernbank.edu/PDF/Outdoor%20Classroom.pdf>

Environmental Education in Wisconsin:

<http://eeinwisconsin.org/>



WSGI

Wisconsin School Garden Initiative

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