

Outdoor Learning is Essential: Resources to Aid Planning

Outdoor learning and outdoor classrooms have always been a priority of the environmental education (EE) community, and these topics are rising to more widespread awareness as vital for education, in particular as we navigate the realities of teaching and learning during the coronavirus pandemic. For the immediate situation, while schools are in remote learning mode, the EE community is helping teachers and schools to adapt, to find creative and engaging ways to include EE in learning even while students can't get to outdoor spaces together. It is important to keep this learning moving to meet academic requirements such as the [Maryland Environmental Literacy Standards](#) as well as to continue to build students' awareness of and excitement for their surrounding natural world. Given the varied venues in which learning is taking place, this is a great time to consider novel ideas for integrating outdoor learning for now and the future. How can time outdoors be promoted within the community, utilizing nature at hand, even (for now) observing safely through windows? Schools can integrate green schoolyards as part of the routine learning environment, to benefit academic achievement as well as physical and mental health. Maryland has a rich network of environmental education providers who are ready, able, and willing to help schools -- both during remote learning and once we return to fully in-person instruction -- by providing teacher professional development, lessons and content material, virtual classroom "visits" and field experiences, and providing support for in-person experiences in the future. Let's reimagine how EE happens!

Here are some of the many resources available. Please share them widely, and use them as needed to support local efforts.

Why outdoor learning is important:

- [Opinion: The Need for Outdoor Environmental Education in Maryland's Remote Learning Curriculum](#), by Chesapeake Bay Foundation
- [Making the Case for Children and Nature](#), Children & Nature Network's Research Library

A local example:

- [Anne Arundel teachers adapt for virtual environmental literacy](#) - Baltimore Sun, 9/13/2020.

Guidance:

- [Guide to Advocating for Outdoor Classrooms in Coronavirus-Era School Reopening](#), from the North American Association for Environmental Education and the National Wildlife Federation
- [Maryland Together: Maryland's Recovery Plan for Education](#), Maryland State Department of Education
- [Green Schoolyards for Healthy Communities](#), Children & Nature Network

Learning resources:

- [Bay Backpack](#) supports hands-on environmental learning by providing educators with information about funding, field studies, student activities, and lessons related to Chesapeake Bay; and helps educators find tools for providing their students with Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences (MWEEs). The [blog](#) includes links to online EE resources for educators, caregivers, and students.
- [MAEOE](#), the Maryland Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education, provides support through professional development, the Maryland Green Schools program, [environmental literacy resources](#) online library, newsletters, and connecting educators through an annual conference and monthly online meetings.
- **Environmental education providers** such as nonprofit organizations, outdoor education centers, agencies, and others are available to partner with schools to assist with environmental education, including providing content and planning assistance for environmental literacy programs at all grade levels, guiding site-based experiential learning, facilitating student stewardship projects, and assisting with green practices for sustainable schools certification. Most EE providers have also developed and posted virtual and at-home learning resources since spring 2020. Many of the partners can be found through Bay Backpack's [Field Studies map](#) and MAEOE's [Green Centers](#).

Funding opportunities:

Funders are making accommodations in their programs to support virtual learning contexts in some form or fashion, to help prepare teachers, support schools, and bring about more equitable access to quality learning for all students. Here are some current opportunities (not an exhaustive list):

- The Chesapeake Bay Trust, with support from the U.S Environmental Protection Agency, **seeks non-profit organizations** to support key Chesapeake Bay Program Goals and Outcomes through Scope of Work #1EE: [Equity and Environmental Education in the Time of Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) to Support Environmental Education Providers](#). **Applications are due October 19, 2020.**
- Chesapeake Bay Trust's [Environmental Education Grant Program](#) seeks proposals that advance environmental literacy and prepare students to take responsible actions to protect and restore their local environment. The Trust knows this is a particularly challenging time and welcomes adaptations and alternative approaches to meet COVID-19 restrictions impacting schools throughout Maryland. Eligible projects for this funding opportunity fall under two tracks. For more information, see the [Request for Proposals \(RFP\)](#). **Applications are due December 10, 2020.**
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's [Chesapeake Bay Watershed Education and Training grant program](#) (Chesapeake B-WET) supports hands-on environmental literacy programming for students, professional learning for teachers and capacity building efforts throughout the Chesapeake Bay Watershed with the goal of fostering stewardship of the Bay and regional natural resources. The Notice of Federal Funding Opportunity will be released in November and **applications due in late winter.**
- Maryland Department of Natural Resources offers funding for environmental education, this year including support for integrating alternative arrangements and platforms for learning about the environment. Two opportunities: **(1)** The [Aquatic Resources Education Grants Program](#), has a **rolling deadline** for smaller requests for individual schools, school districts and their outdoor environmental education centers; and **(2)** for larger requests, the [Grants Gateway](#) Outdoor Learning outcome will fund activities through June 2022, including distance learning, with **applications due by December 16, 2020.**
- And remember that schools' [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) (ESSA) funding can be used to support environmental education! School district staff are encouraged to work with their Environmental Literacy Coordinator to include EE, environmental literacy, and outdoor learning in ESSA plans.

This information has been prepared and shared by the [Maryland Project Green Classrooms Initiative](#), an advisory body working collaboratively to promote outdoor learning, discovery, healthy play, and career exploration in Maryland. 9/24/2020