



“Teaching Outside 101” Module

Case Study: Community-Based Outdoor Education and Exploration

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“Giving students a fresh, open space to move, explore, create, imagine is exactly what nature offers. It’s a bonus that the outdoors gives them a screen break, too.”



The Project and The Inspiration

Palermo Consolidated School (PCS) has a longstanding tradition of using the outdoors as a place for learning and exploration. Outdoor experiences for students at PCS can range from simple “movement breaks” to lessons framed within education standards across disciplines. There are many types of outdoor spaces at PCS, including gardens, trails, and outdoor classrooms. Administrators, teachers, community partners, and other organizations support access to the outdoors and environmental education at PCS. Students go outside to stretch, cross country ski, mountain bike, pick apples, learn plant identification, explore trails, and much more.

Jared Grenier - Physical and Health Educator, Trail and Garden Club Organizer, and Athletic Director - is deeply involved in bringing students outside to enjoy the school’s numerous outdoor resources. Jared helps facilitate outdoor access for students, and individual teachers integrate academic standards into their outdoor learning lessons. In physical education, Jared teaches to both academic and citizenship behavior standards. In the past, Jared has included lessons about stability, force, motion, and citizenship through mountain biking, ensuring that students were learning to maintain a safe environment by following the teacher’s directions. These lessons could also be integrated with other disciplines, such as physics, leadership, and ethics.

Jared has always had a love for nature and demonstrates his passion through lessons taught outside. Jared also believes that students can learn a lot outside. Especially in the “modern age” of technology - and COVID - Jared recognizes outdoor space as one important way for many students to “decompress,” whether it’s through environmental learning, or simply breathing some fresh air.

Resources in Relationships

Deep relationships at the school, within the community, and with other organizations, as well as access to numerous well-developed outdoor spaces, are the critical components of the success of outdoor learning at PCS. Partnerships have helped provide physical and educational support to bring students outside, enhance outdoor learning, and create a framework for the continued improvement and expansion of outdoor learning at PCS.

Partnerships with local organizations - including the Palermo School Club, a local nonprofit - have provided many necessary physical resources. These physical resources have included sporting equipment, such as bikes, cross country skis, and disc golf baskets. Other forms of physical support, such as gravel, benches, and tree removal services, have aided in the creation of outdoor learning spaces. Besides “formalized” outdoor classrooms, PCS also has a trail system, a butterfly garden, an orchard, a disc golf course, and several perennial plantings.

“We have been supported by AmeriCorps members through MidCoast Conservancy. They oriented me in teaching kids some outdoor sports, then MidCoast Conservancy gave me the ability to transition to teaching those activities on my own.”

Partnerships with other organizations, such as AmeriCorps, The Master Gardener Association, and Maine Agriculture in the Classroom have supported outdoor learning at PCS by offering training and education for school staff. Topics have included plant identification, garden explorations, insect observations, sports, and outdoor art. AmeriCorps members through the Midcoast Conservancy have facilitated field trips to nearby nature centers, and PCS now has an annual field trip to Hidden Valley Nature Center in Jefferson, which provides year-round programming. As a second-year teacher, Jared recognizes the importance of the relationships he inherited, as well as new ones he’s fostering, to provide both the physical and educational tools necessary for successful outdoor learning. These programs have taken years to develop, and Jared acknowledges the previous school staff, including educators and administrators, who were instrumental in building these outdoor learning spaces over time.

Impact

Jared’s goal to “expand [the students’] knowledge about outdoor activities throughout the year” in conjunction with outdoor lessons integrating learning standards has had numerous positive impacts on students at PCS. Jared reports that students are excited to learn and spend time outside and that doing so has helped students to manage their behavior and improve focus when back inside. Jared and his students take part in “movement breaks,” time spent outside when students are encouraged to move their bodies. This helps to engage learners in physical ways and offers an outlet for students throughout an otherwise sedentary day. Jared also sees how some students connect with an aspect of a lesson and integrate it into their life outside of school. For example, students who were introduced to disc golf in class were excited to play the sport with their family and friends.

Advice and Tips for Managing Students Outside

Jared encourages anyone trying to start an outdoor program to examine the existing landscape before implementing new programs, as every community is different. “When you first start out, look, listen, and learn. Starting off headstrong with a new program can often result in pushback,” says Jared. In order to move outdoor learning forward, Jared recommends understanding the history of the school to help identify existing resources, gaps in the community, barriers to implementation, and potential opportunities.

Pro Tip: Engage the students based on their natural curiosity, and maintain some flexibility in the outdoor lesson plan. Jared says, “If you are in the garden and a pair of bald eagles fly over, that’s a great opportunity to spark interest.”

One existing resource is the simple natural curiosity of students, and providing opportunities for students to express what they’re curious or excited about is a great way to get or keep students engaged. While Jared recommends being consistent in the outdoor classroom, (for example, consistent rules and expectations), he also acknowledges the necessity for flexibility, especially as a tool for allowing students to engage with unexpected outdoor experiences. When something occurs outside of the lesson plan, allowing time for students to express their curiosity about it can help them engage more deeply with the material.

“Community-Based Outdoor Education and Exploration” Summary: Palermo Consolidated School has a culture of outdoor learning and exploration that has been developed over several years. The culture is supported through existing and developing relationships within the school, community, and other organizations that provide both physical and educational resources. Students have numerous opportunities to be physically active and learn to specific standards in the outdoors through the use of trails, gardens, sporting equipment, field trips, and other opportunities outside.

Partner Organizations: AmeriCorps, The Master Gardener Association, Maine Agriculture in the Classroom, MidCoast Conservancy, Hidden Valley Nature Center, Palermo School Club