

Voluntary Guidance and Resources: Increasing the Use of Your Outdoor Spaces



MCPS encourages schools to consider how the outdoors can be incorporated during the school day.

MCPS and MCCPTA are working closely with the Maryland Green Schools Program and Green Schoolyards America to offer best practice guidance for getting started and/or expanding outdoor efforts. The guidance below focuses on considerations for spaces, staff, and students.

During the July 27, 2021 Board of Education meeting, Dr. McKnight, Interim Superintendent of Schools suggested, “Our kids enjoy using outdoor spaces and many of our schools have embraced that even more... we do encourage and want them to continue to use those spaces.”

Getting Started

- **Pick an initiative to start**
 - Outdoor meals
 - Outdoor learning
 - Green Schoolyards
- **Set up your plan**
 - Identify ideal outdoor sites
 - Set a schedule
 - Consider student needs
 - Plan for emergencies, safety, and restroom use
- **Involve all stakeholders in planning, including:**
 - members of your Instructional Leadership Team
 - your building services team
- **Start small with pilot projects**



Taking your First Steps

No special equipment needed! Outdoor activities can easily be incorporated during the school day, such as:

- “lunch bunch,”
- incentives,
- regularly scheduled alternate instructional location (example: reading and writing time),
- real-world outdoor exploratory lab stations incorporated into science or math instruction.

Many schools have found success using these techniques:

- Use a [google sheet](#) for rotational scheduling of a highly desired space, such as a courtyard.
- Incorporate an outdoor learning space (with bad weather alternate) into your master schedule.
- Use existing markings on sidewalks to serve as “sit spots.”
- If going outdoors for lunch, bring a trash can and recycling bin on wheels.

For more ideas on how to begin, please visit [Green Schoolyards America](#), or reach out to the MCPS Division of Sustainability and Compliance at Sustainability@mcpsmd.org, the MCPS Outdoor Environmental Education Programs at Laurie_C_Jenkins@mcpsmd.org, or greenschools@mccpta.org for assistance!

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Potential Outdoor Sites at your school? Look For:

- Choose sites with natural boundaries, shade protection, and reduced environmental distractions, such as sound pollution, during the school day.
- Consider spaces that already have established seating.
- Don't overlook dual-purpose areas, such as stairs, amphitheaters or stadiums. Can part of the blacktop, parking lot, bus loop, or spaces between relocatable classrooms be used temporarily?
- Consider lunch areas near cafeterias and/or recess areas for easier access.
- Sometimes the best spots are overlooked! Here are MCPS examples of potential spaces:

Established seating

[Courtyards](#)

Consider dual purpose sites

(link shows additional examples in MD)



Natural boundaries



Side yards



Shaded edges



The Benefits - Read more in these peer-reviewed studies:

1. **Cognitive:** Being in nature [improves attention and memory](#), which can translate to [increased focus when students return to the indoor classroom](#).
2. **Equity:** Inclusive opportunities for students to learn outdoors results in increased [enthusiasm, self-motivation and academic](#) performance. Outdoor learning can also [address gender achievement gaps](#).
3. **Health:** Being outdoors dramatically [reduces pathogen transmission](#), and can reduce stress, anxiety and depression. Time outdoors can also [enhance social-emotional skills, encourage physical activity, and even improve vision and sleep](#).
4. **Teachers:** Participating in outdoor learning with students can [increase job satisfaction](#) for teachers!
5. **Green School Certification:** Providing outdoor educational experiences is great evidence to include in your school's Green School Certification or Recertification.



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