

## **Taking Your Class Outside**

### **The Nuts and Bolts**

#### **Get Support**

##### Administrators

It is especially important that administrators understand the rationale of integrating the environment into the curriculum.

##### Invite your principal to join your class

Seeing an activity is more potent than hearing about it or reading it in a lesson plan

##### Connect the outdoor activity to the required standards or content

It is essential that the administration understands how the standards are incorporated into the outdoor instruction. Provide the principal with a brief written overview of your activity showing specific links to the curriculum.

##### Colleagues

Look to fellow teachers for support. Share your knowledge of how students and teachers benefit from outdoor activities. Get several teachers involved in developing cross-curricular activities. Energy and creativity are great by-products when two or three share enthusiasm about the new approach or activity.

##### Parents

Involve parents as much as possible. They need to know that you are not wasting valuable instruction time. Once they understand how the outdoor activities will influence their child's education, you gain strong advocates of your program.

#### **Safety First**

Your main concern is to keep students safe.

Inform the office when you go outdoors

Take along a cell phone

Be aware of allergies and other special needs

Show students poison ivy and other natural hazards

Take another adult on extended outings

Bring along a simple first-aid kit

Provide a few rules of precaution before you begin your adventure

#### **Before Heading Out**

Normally spontaneous hikes rarely work, so plan ahead. Visit the site and decide how it will be incorporated into your lesson plan. Make sure to visit the area a day or so ahead of time.

##### Decide how much time will spend outdoors

If you and/or your students are new using the outdoors as a learning tool, keep your first treks short focusing on only one or two specific activities. Begin your excursions early in the school year so students understand that trips outdoors are extension of your classroom. Once your students understand what is expected, you can spend more time outside doing more complex activities.

##### Best time to go outdoors

It is important to set a pattern of use. Don't limit going outdoors only to warm days! Set a day of the week for outdoors activities and stick to it.

### Avoid the “recess” mentality

Students of any age equate outdoors with freedom, movement and different behavior expectations. You want your students to be relaxed, but it is critical to establish that outdoor activities are not play time.

While still in the classroom, review behaviors and rules that you expect outside.

Clearly establish the location and boundaries where you will be working.

Once outside – go over the rules again! The rule here is repeat...repeat...repeat!

### Arrange student work groups

### Review vocabulary and provide background information

### Discuss what will be done outdoors

This sets the stage and makes it clear that you have a definite purpose for going outdoors.

### Sort equipment and materials

Make sure that you have all necessary materials to complete the activities. Have inexpensive backpacks, rather than boxes, loaded with standard items such as hand lenses, plastic bags, lapboards, field guides. Then all you need to do is add the necessary equipment for that day’s activities.

### Establish rules on collecting natural material and animals

If you are in a state or national park, you are not permitted to remove materials.

On the school grounds, if the specimen can be studied where it is, try to leave it.

Unless you are willing to do careful research about an animal and can give time and resources to keep wildlife humanely indoors, better to study them outside.

## **Tally Ho – Out You Go**

**Teaching outdoors is not much different than teaching in a classroom!**

### Clearly establish boundaries and repeat behavioral expectations

### Circle the Troops

Talking to students outdoors requires a little different approach. Have students form a circle when giving instructions or debriefing. Trying to talk to a mass of kids doesn’t work. Those beyond the first layer of students usually are not engaged.

### Circulate constantly

### Encourage respect for nature

### View the unexpected as a bonus

## **It is OK to say “I don’t know!”**

NEVER make something up. Take the “I don’t know” and make it into a great opportunity for both you and the students to learn together. You will find that your students will respect you more if you are truthful.

## **Follow Up**

The learning does not stop after the outdoor experience. Take advantage of the enthusiasm that you have created. Again, make sure outdoor activities are integrated into the general class routine. Students need to clearly see how the outdoor activities mesh with indoor instruction. Don’t forget give them opportunities to share and reflect about their experiences.

Adapted from Broda, Herbert, *Schoolyard-enhanced Learning: Using the Outdoors as an Instructional Tool, K-8*, 2007, Stenhouse Publishers

Olien, Rebecca, *Walk This Way! Classroom Hikes to Learning*, 1998, Beeline Books

## Literature

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- \*Cornell, Joseph, *Sharing Nature with Children*, 1989, Dawn Publishing
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- \*Kirkland, Jane, *No Student Left Indoors*, 2007, Stillwater Publishing
- \*Leslie, Clare Walker, Tallmadge, John, and Wessels, Tom, *Into the Field: A guide to Locally Focused Teaching*, 1999, The Orion Series
- \*Louv, Richard, *The Last Child in the Woods-Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, 2005, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill**
- \*Melber, Leah M., *Informal Learning and Field Trips, Engaging Students in Standards-Based Experiences Across the K-5 Curriculum*, Cowin Press, 2008
- \*Myers, *Learning from Nature, Cross-Curricular Activities to Foster Creative and Critical Thinking*
- \*Olien, Rebecca, *Walk This Way! Classroom Hikes to Learning*, 1998, Beeline Books
- \*Russell, Helen Ross, *Ten-Minute Field Trips*, 1993, National Science Teachers Association
- \*Sobel, David, *Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart of Nature Education*, 1996, The Orion Society
- \*Sobel, David, *Childhood and Nature: Design Principles for Educators*, 2008, Stenhouse Publishers
- \*Sobel, David, *Place-Based Education; Connecting Classrooms and Communities*, 1996, The Orion Society

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Newsweek.com reported that the school board of Oil City Elementary in Louisiana threatened to close the school due to low performance and inconsistent enrollment. The school's principal decided to train the entire teaching staff in the use of nature-based curricula and raised a few thousand dollars for outdoor classrooms. As a result, enrollment rose nearly a third and test scores jumped, making the school one of the highest achieving in the district. [www.newsweek.com/id/157577](http://www.newsweek.com/id/157577)

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American Institute for Research reported that science scores for students participating in outdoor education went up 27% immediately after their experience compared to those students that did not participate. Ten weeks following the experience the knowledge was retained.

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No Child Left Inside Act that supports local and statewide efforts to expand and improve environmental education for K-12 public schools passed the House of Representatives September 19, 2008. The bill is for funding to train teachers to deliver high quality environmental education and utilize the local environmental as an extension of the classroom; incentives for states to develop State Environmental Literacy Plans to insure that every student is prepared to understand the environmental challenges of the future; encouragement for teachers, administrators, and school systems to make time and resources available for environmental education for all students; Environmental Education will be integrated across core subject areas. The bill will move on to the Senate next year.

# Why Take Students Outdoors

## Nature - the most powerful audio-visual tool we have!

The State Education and Environment Roundtable, comprised of 40 schools around the country, have implemented the Environment as an Integrating Context (EIC) learning style. This group released a study called *Closing the Achievement Gap* that reports the results of 39 comparative analyses of academic achievement using comprehensive and subject-matter specific, standardized tests, grade point averages and behavioral data.

### Comprehensive Assessment

- \*100% of the assessments indicated EIC students preformed better than traditional students

### Language Arts

- \*100% of the assessments indicated EIC students outperformed peers in traditional programs
- \*As students became involved in first-hand study of the natural and soci-cultural world, EIC students at all the study schools grew more enthusiastic and proficient in developing and applying language arts skills.

### Math

- \*71% of the assessments indicated EIC students outperformed peers in traditional programs
- \*Hands-on experiences and problem solving activities fostered by EIC, offered students concrete learning opportunities and helped them to more fully understand abstract math skills. These students understood the skills more thoroughly than traditional students.

### Science

- \*75% of the assessments indicated EIC students outperformed peers in traditional programs
- \*EIC students more effectively mastered scientific knowledge and skills and achieved a deeper understanding of scientific concepts and processes.

### Social Studies

- \*100% of the assessments indicated EIC students outperformed peers in traditional programs
- \*In context to their local environment, students made connections between geography, politics, economics and natural resources in their region. Making these connections sparked students' interests, engaged them in their schoolwork, and helped them learn the significance of social studies within a context that is personally meaningful.

### Critical Thinking Skills

- \*After switching to EIC approaches, students' cognitive abilities appeared to grow more rapidly. They became better able to synthesize information and to think strategically.
- \*Giving students the freedom to explore their surroundings and develop their own questions about the functions, connections, and interrelationships they observed facilitated the development of high-level thinking skills.

### Interpersonal Abilities

- \*100% of the assessments indicated improvement in student behavior, attendance and attitudes
- \*The collaborative learning atmosphere encouraged with EIC-based learning helped students to understand others, develop a sense of community and comprehend their place in the world.
- \*They also learned to communicate with peers, function democratically and work together toward mutual goals. Each student had opportunities to contribute their individual talents and to demonstrate their expertise to their peers.
- \*Students began to recognize the value of diverse individual contributions to their group projects and encouraged each other as they worked side-by-side.
- \*Provides motivation for the reluctant learner

### Other Benefits

- Adds variety to teaching and learning
- Compatible with many current practices in education
  - Inquiry Teaching
  - Block and flexible scheduling