



Why Districts Should be Planning and Implementing Outdoor Learning to Disrupt Inequities from the Pandemic

Today and every school year, districts and schools develop plans to use their state, federal, and philanthropic dollars to focus on high impact and critical areas of education. In this moment, districts are asked to attend to: accelerated learning; social-emotional and wellness needs; rigorous standards-based instruction; meaningful engagement with our communities; culturally responsive practices; and, health and safety while combating the risk of quarantining whole classes and moving schooling back and forth between in person and virtual. Outdoor learning is an inequity-disrupting approach that enables districts and schools to address the holistic needs of staff and students, especially the most vulnerable.

The past year's "convergence of disruption, innovation, empowerment, and funding offers an unprecedented opportunity for a reset. We have a chance to consider what we can do differently to better serve students, families, and communities, particularly those marginalized by inequitable systems even before the pandemic. We should not return to the old normal."

Linda Darling-Hammond, Karen Pittman, Jennifer Peck, in *Educating the Whole Child*, a blog from the Learning Policy Institute, 2021

Current research shows that remote learning has widened and will continue to widen disparities between white students and students of color.¹ Schools need to disrupt and reset this pattern. One aspect of "resetting" is clear and straightforward. Decades of research supports outdoor learning as a central strategy to address the discrepancies in student learning, achievement, and in physical and emotional health that have been exacerbated by the past year and a half.

Outdoor learning keeps schools open during a pandemic. A hundred years ago, schools around the world moved

outside to reduce the spread of tuberculosis and Spanish flu. It is even easier and more important to do today. We know that

1. Outdoor learning opportunities **increase content knowledge and related practices.**
2. Students demonstrate **better attention and are better thinkers** when learning takes place in outdoor environments.
3. Students have opportunities to **apply learning** to real-world, place-based contexts.
4. Exposure to nature enhances learners' **cognitive functioning, self-discipline, and character development.**
5. Numerous physical and mental health benefits accrue from spending time outdoors, such as **reduced stress and loneliness, and increased physical activity and resilience.**

Outdoor time is versatile and can be used for social-emotional learning, recess, break, lunch, co-curricular time, academic time, expanded learning, and specialty classes. Many districts and schools already have school gardens, outdoor classrooms, playgrounds, afterschool programs, relationships with community partners, science curriculum, and other resources that can be redeployed for this purpose.

1. Emma Dorn, Bryan Hancock, Jimmy Sarakatsannis, and Ellen Viruleg. "COVID-19 and education: The lingering effects of unfinished learning." *McKinsey & Company*. July 27, 2021.

Stimulus Funding Available to Support Outdoor Learning

The massive infusion of money to districts and schools provides many possibilities for supporting outdoor learning. How do we shift schooling to improve learning conditions and achieve more equitable outcomes for our students, families, and communities for years to come? We can do this with outdoor learning.

Funding outdoor learning is a sustainable, equity-centered use of federal and state dollars. Below is a sample of funds available to support outdoor learning to achieve an array of district goals.

BILL	Date Passed	Total Funding	K12 Public Schools Allocation	% Funds to LEAs	Relevant Dates
CARES Act Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act	March 2020	\$2.2 Trillion	\$13.5 Billion (ESSER I)	90%	Must be obligated** by Dec. 30, 2021
Supplemental CARES Act Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA)	December 2020	\$900 Billion	\$54.3 Billion (ESSER II)	90%	Must be obligated** by Sept. 3, 2022*
American Rescue Plan American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA)	March 2021	\$1.9 Trillion	\$122 Billion (ESSER III)	90%	Must be obligated** by Sept. 30, 2023*

State Level: CALIFORNIA					
AB 86 In person Instruction (IPI) Grants Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Grants	March 2021	\$6.6 Billion	\$2 Billion (IPI Grants) \$4.6 Billion (ELO Grants)	100%	Must be spent by August 31, 2022
AB 128 & AB 130 Governor's Budget Proposals for Teacher Recruitment and Professional Development; K-12 Budget trailer bill Learn More	NA		\$2.9 Billion		

* Under the Tydings Amendment, Section 412(B) of the General Education Provisions Act, 20 U.S.C. 1225(B), any funds not obligated at the end of the initial federal funding period shall remain available for an additional period of 12 months, giving LEAs another year to obligate funds from these packages.

**See [here](#) for definition

Resources: [eeGuidance Resources for ESSER Funds](#)

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