Management Tips for Taking Your Classroom Outdoors

- **Talk with your administration and know your division's rules**

  Just like this may be your first time taking students outside for learning, this may be the first time your administration is being asked to approve time outside that is not PE or recess. There is lots of research that supports learning outside (see "Research Supporting Outdoor Instruction" at the end of this document) but that doesn't mean everyone will be immediately comfortable with the idea. Talk through your plan, learning objectives, etc. with your administration. Discuss potential safety concerns and create a plan to address them.

  Some divisions have outdoor learning protocols laid out in division handbooks or environmental literacy plans, be sure you are following all division specific guidelines and protocols.

- **Refer to your school grounds as a living laboratory or outdoor classroom with your students and administrators.**

  Nature persists even in mowed school grounds and ball fields. Referring to your school grounds as a living laboratory or outdoor classroom with your students and administrators, you are reflecting on the goals of using the school grounds to support SOL driven instruction. Administrators and students can begin to transform how they think about the space.

  If recess is a part of your school day, consider exiting the building using a different route than the recess exit. If you can't use a different exit, consider adding something to your routines that signal this is not informal outdoor learning such as recess but formal outdoor learning.

- **Establish a well-defined purpose for going outside and the outdoor parameters before going outside.**

  Be sure students understand the specific tasks and learning objectives that are to be accomplished and the boundaries of the space where they are to complete their work. Include safety reminders when reviewing learning objectives.

- **Plan Ahead.**

  Once you have administrative permission to take learning outside, it is important that you feel comfortable and confident when you take the students outdoors. Your mindset about learning outside will directly affect your students' mindset. Before you go out with the students, scout the area. This includes walking the area, considering possible stopping points, determining features could you point out, how you will set up the special boundaries for the activity, identifying safety concerns, etc.

  Try doing this once a season during the school year as well (even grassy schoolyards change with the seasons), not just when you already have an activity planned. Allow the change of seasons to spark ideas of how you can tie what you are learning to an outdoor experience.

  For younger students especially, explain the importance of outdoor learning so that parents will support your efforts. Send reminders so that students have a higher potential of arriving in appropriate clothing and pre-apply sun or bug protection as needed for outdoor learning days. A consistent schedule can be helpful for families.

  Be sure to have a plan for students who arrive at school unprepared for outdoor learning.

  See the Safety section for more things to consider when planning ahead.

- **Set up exit and entry routines and don't forget about the transition.**

  Just as you have routines for starting class inside consider establishing routines for transitioning to your outdoor classroom.

  Exit Routines:

  - What is the routine before exiting the indoor classroom to go outside?
  - What will the students need to pick up each time (clipboards, whiteboards, pencils, nature journals, etc.)? Try to place these items in the same place each time.

  Reentry Routines:

  - Where do they return items on the way back in?
  - Where will they wash their hands when coming back into the building?

  Transition Routines:

  - Students will also need a few minutes to settle into the outdoor learning environment and begin their tasks, just as they would when moving from one teacher's indoor classroom to the next. The outdoor environment naturally makes students more alert and curious, new sights, sounds, etc. Build in some time to allow students to take in these things so they can then focus on the task at hand.
  - What is the routine for coming back together as a group before entering the building?
  - Where will the group come back together? How will you call students back to this place (whistle? Call and return chant?)?
  - How will you pass along information or a change in plan to students while outside?
  - Use natural pauses to gather students and share information. (A tip for you as the teacher when sharing information outside, be sure you are the one facing the sun/any other distraction and not your students)

- **Start Small**

  Students need time at the beginning of the year/semester to learn the rules and rhythm of learning outside in your classroom just like they need to learn how your classroom operates inside.

  At first, choose short excursions with a single focus to practice behavior expectations. For example, during the couple weeks of school/semester, have students walk around the school as a group using the sidewalk only and look for and record information about something specific such 2 examples of weathering. Use each time to practice exit, reentry, and transition routines too! You will learn about your group from these simple activities.

  Students will learn quickly that the outdoors is simply an extension of your classroom. Over time, make excursions longer, with more difficult learning tasks, and with more student independence. This will help build trust and allow you to address anything that comes up quickly before sending students further out into the school grounds. Plus, the more you go out, the easier and more routine it gets for everyone.

- **Remember that learning looks different outdoors.**

  Student voices are often louder, and their body movements tend to be larger outdoors as excitement is likely to be high and expressed more physically than in the indoor classroom. Students may move around more frequently to share what they found with others. Encourage them to talk to each other about what they find.

- **Believe in your students.**

  ALL students, from the highest achieving to the most challenged, can learn outdoors. Resist the temptation to use outdoor learning as a reward for good behavior. Communicate a belief that learning outdoors is simply part of everyday learning. Your students may well surprise you.

  You may have some classes that need an extra minute to gather focus before the learning begins. Just as you may establish a moment of silence or quick get the wiggles out routine for them indoors before you start a lesson, you may need to do something similar before beginning an outdoor lesson. Sometimes a quick turn to a partner and name 5 things you can see or hear gives students a minute to take in the new scenery and focus.

- **Keep students accountable to behavioral expectations**.

  Consider the rules, best practices, and consequences in your indoor classroom setting. How can you adapt what you do for behaviors inside your indoor classroom for outside? The overall expectations don't change because students went outside.

  Consider creating an outdoor learning agreement that the student and parents' sign. See more information under "Safety."

  Have an area set aside to serve as a "time out" area if someone needs to step away from the task and take a break.

- **Anticipate Student Concerns and Ensure Accessibility.**

  Fear of the unknown is real, and the outdoors might be an unknown to your students. Take time to address any student fears before going outside.

  For example, many people do not like flying insects close to them. Flying insects are attracted to people due to our multiple scents that come from cosmetics, laundry detergent, and food. The best protocol for one that won't leave you alone is to protect your head by pulling your shoulders up to your ears and shield your face with your hands and quickly walk away from that spot. The solution is not to flail about or swat at the insect using your hands or hat, those are the best ways to get stung.

  Know the accessibility of your students and their comfortability levels for the outdoors. Discuss the activity beforehand with students with accessibility concerns, what do they need from you to feel comfortable learning in the outdoors?

  Modify learning activities as needed to ensure that all students can participate in outdoor learning regardless of physical or learning needs.

- **Get help.**

  Invite school/parent volunteers, specialists, and administrators to join in your activities and work with the students. Outline specific ways they can contribute, what authority they have while outdoors, and when they should request your assistance. Be sure to also share routines, learning objectives, potential safety hazards, etc. just like you would with your students.

- **Stay flexible.**

  Nature can be unpredictable and outdoor learning can introduce unexpected challenges. You might take the class outside and a student finds a cool looking insect. Your lesson gets derailed for 10 minutes while everyone takes a look and asks you questions you might not know the answer to. Sometimes saying "I'm not sure what kind of insect that is, how can we find out?" leads deeper learning than you originally planned.

- **Model respect for living things.**

  Emphasize that all living things, plants, animals, fungi are to be respected and preferably not disturbed. If organisms are collected be sure they are returned to their original location. In terms of gathering items, use the "1 in 20 Rule." Collect a plant only if more than 20 of the same species are growing in the immediate area. This applies to parts of plants as well- 1 leaf from a shrub with at least 20 leaves). If collecting animals (vertebrates or invertebrates) be sure to follow all district, county, and state level safety protocols and permitting. Leave No Trace also applies here- be sure students bring everything back inside with them that they took outside.

- **Safety.**

  Before heading outside for the first time and every time:

  ∴ Scout the area one last time and identify hazards for pre-outdoor learning discussion with students
  ∴ Monitor the weather (3 days out, 1 day before, the day of) and have a backup lesson just in case.
  ∴ Review student medical records with the nurse for allergies, asthma, bee-sting reactions, and any other health conditions before heading outdoors.
    - Discuss student health concerns and what symptoms to look for and have a plan just in case.
    - Some schools may have you pick up an epi pen from the nurse before heading out each time.
    - Also be sure to talk with the nurse and administrators about any school or division specific protocols for injuries, fire drills, or other code drills for when you are outside.
  ∴ Make sure the office knows where you will be and how to contact you. Some schools may require you to take a radio or your cell phone for communication.
  ∴ Review any pertinent outdoor classroom rules.
    - At the beginning of the year, consider an outdoor learning agreement for how students should interact with each other and their environment while outside. The contract could include ideas such as leave no trace, to stay on trails, do not pick up live animals or plants unless our activity calls for it, common outdoor hazards and how to avoid them. Include student input on the content of the contract.
  ∴ Remind students to report any bites, stings, slips, trips, and falls to the you immediately.
  ∴ Teach students to identify and avoid hazards (e.g., poisonous plants, ant hills, ticks, sharp debris).
  ∴ Demonstrate how to safely turn over a rock or log toward yourself to provide a safe escape for an animal to move away from you.
  ∴ Provide safety equipment like gloves, tweezers, aspirators, etc. for collecting organisms.

  Carry an Outdoor Learning backpack with

  ∴ Timer: to keep on task and ensure sure you allow time for wrap-up/cleanup
  ∴ Safety supplies- an up-to-date first aid kit, cell phone/school radio, any necessary emergency medication for students (epi pen, etc.- you may need to pick this up from the nurse before heading outside), field trip forms with emergency contact info (if heading off site), tissues, wipes/hand sanitizer, insect repellent, sunscreen, extra water, tweezers for splinter removal, lint roller (makes a great tick remover from clothing)
  ∴ Extra lesson supplies- handouts, clipboards, pencils

- ∴ Tools for identification- magnifying glasses, id books, a small net and critter box (you never know when you might come across something cool and want to share it with students)
- ∴ anything else you might think useful or is required by your school.

During the activity

- ∴ Students should be careful where they walk as they ground will be uneven and there could be something like an anthill which they would not want to step on.
- ∴ Students should be sure they are not leaving any equipment behind as they move around the outdoor space.
- ∴ Walk around to monitor student progress on the task but also things like heat exhaustion, water needs, etc.
- ∴ Consistently take a head count of students and be aware of your surroundings.
  - If appropriate, use a buddy system and/or assign adults to lead small groups for better supervision

Post activity

- ∴ Always wash hands when returning to the school building.
- ∴ Account for all equipment students took outdoors.

After the activity

Lesson Debrief- Preferably before class ends for the day but can be the next day.

Facilitate a debrief session where students can share their observations and experiences. Encourage them to connect what they learned outside to course concepts and share any new questions they may have (this could lead to student driven learning opportunities or project-based learning).

Continue to tie outdoor learning experiences to content throughout the semester/year, "remember when we..."

Gather Feedback

Don't forget to check in with your students after the outdoor activity to have them evaluate their outdoor learning experience. Ask students what worked and what didn't. Have students explain why and offer reasonable solutions. Nothing like taking a class to a cool spot in the schoolyard for weeks and then getting feedback that every time you had the students positioned so they were staring in the sun the whole time and therefore distracted while you were talking.

Equipment Management

Ensure all materials and equipment are accounted for when returning to the classroom- hopefully students will return equipment as instructed through your reentry routines. It will pay in the long run to take a few minutes to organize, clean up, and/or sanitize any equipment used in outdoor lessons before putting it in storage. If students can be involved safely in this, great!

Sources:

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This revised document, version 2.0, contains ideas collected from Virginia formal and nonformal educators that anonymously responded to the *Best Tips and Tricks for Taking Youth Outside for Learning Experiences* survey conducted by DWR Wildlife Education Program in winter of 2026.

Research Supporting Outdoor Instruction

Children and Nature Network: a collection of easy-to-read, research-based infographics and talking points about how nature makes kids healthier, happier, and smarter. https://www.childrenandnature.org/resource-hub/resources/

North American Association for Environmental Education: use the search tool to find reports on environmental education variables such as student ages, developmental outcomes, education, human health, and social/environmental justice. https://eepro.naaee.org/research/eeresearch-landing

National Wildlife Federation: special reports on how the outdoors affects children's physical, mental, social, and academic health. https://www.dnr.state.mn.us/education/teachers/teach-outside.html