

# Take it Outside!

## Outdoor Learning and Eating at City Schools

Bringing students outside can complement classroom learning. Benefits for both students and adults include alleviating stress and anxiety, promoting social-emotional learning, and providing time for creative exploration. Outdoor spaces can support all content areas. Plus, being outside reduces the chance of transmitting COVID19. So, consider your school's outdoor space as valuable educational space and as an extra cafeteria! Kids benefit from even short amounts of time outside where they can stretch their legs, move around, and have a different experience.



See these additional resources for **Outdoor Meals**

### Outdoor learning supports the *Blueprint for Success* and the *Equity Policy*

Many of our students have long faced barriers that restrict their freedom of movement in outdoor spaces, including barriers rooted in systemic racial inequities; infrastructure (absence of sidewalks and parks); concerns about safety; environmental toxins; and hyper-surveillance when in public spaces.

**The time is now to disrupt and dismantle all inequities wherever and whenever City Schools has the power to do so.** We can intentionally provide students with safe, engaging, and joyful time outside, something even more restricted during the pandemic. Expanded outdoor movement and exploration support students' academic, physical, and mental well-being. Time outdoors also benefits staff, helping to fortify the foundation they provide to our students.



Neighborhoods lacking access to recreational facilities

**81%** of HISPANIC neighborhoods

**70%** of AFRICAN AMERICAN neighborhoods

**38%** of WHITE neighborhoods

Children living below the poverty line are

**159%** more likely to be deprived of recess

Adults are physically active at different rates. In

**5** states, more than 30% of WHITES are inactive

**22** states, more than 30% of HISPANICS are inactive

**23** states, more than 30% of AFRICAN AMERICANS are inactive

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## Identify a Site (or Two or Three!)

Every school is different, so walk around your campus and identify spots where teachers can bring students right now, or, with a little work, could be available in the future. Consider these factors:

- Sufficient space for students and adults to maintain physical distancing and to minimize distractions.
- Quiet, to allow for class discussion or silent reflection.
- Shade, to reduce heat on hot days.
- Seating, either on the ground or on mats, cushions, buckets, etc.
- Boundaries, so students are clear where they may be.
- Points of interest to observe or incorporate into a lesson, such as trees, flower beds, landscaping, etc.
- Accessibility, so all students can reach the space.
- A park or green space may be within a short walk of your campus and be a wonderful place to bring students (a walking field trip permission slip may be needed).



## Student Safety

Just like you have procedures in place to mitigate risk in indoor spaces, develop procedures for bringing students outdoors.

- Identify areas of potential risk, e.g., busy streets, tripping hazards, or sharp objects. Work with administrators and custodial staff to minimize them by addressing or eliminating areas of concern.
- Exit and re-enter your school according to your school's system.
- Check with school nurse and/or parents to identify students with bee sting allergies, seasonal allergies, or other health issues.
- Have a small bag ready that includes student emergency contact numbers, first aid kit, hard candy for any student with diabetes, a bottle of water, etc.
- Plan for the inevitable bathroom break.
- Pay attention to the weather. Look outside. Check the temperature and forecast and [www.airnow.gov](http://www.airnow.gov). Ensure students have access to water on hot days and sufficient clothing on cold days.
- Know and be prepared to follow your school's procedures for emergency situations.



# Outdoor Learning and Eating at City Schools

## Student Management and Enjoyment

Going outdoors for class may be new to you and your students. To get comfortable, consider these ahead of time:

- Set outdoor classroom routines.
  - Establish procedures for going outdoors.
  - Develop outdoor classroom rules.
  - Designate an outdoor gathering spot to meet and await instructions, and to gather before returning indoors.
  - Consider starting class with a circle and a short reflection or mindful moment.
  - You are outside with your students for class, not for recess or PE; review expectations and remember that students need time to adjust to any new learning setting.
- Give students something to carry – clipboards, notebooks and other tools helps students take their expedition more seriously.
- Go out often; the more you go out, the easier and more enjoyable it gets for everyone.
- If working with students with special needs, such as developmental disorders or sound and texture sensitivities, inform them and their para-educators of what to expect in advance so you can jointly plan for any needed accommodations.
- Learning may look different outdoors. Students may talk louder. They may be more excited. They may move around more.
- If your students are young, aim for at least two adults to accompany them outside. This is particularly important if one student needs to return to the school for any reason (bathroom break, misbehavior, injury, etc).



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## Infrastructure and Equipment

Outdoor classrooms and eating areas can be elaborate and expensive. But they can also be simple and low-budget and be very effective and engaging! Items that can facilitate outdoor learning include:

**Seating:** Permanent seating is great, but so is portable seating. Consider 5-gallon buckets (each student can carry materials outside, then turn it upside down and sit on it!). Or, consider plastic grocery bags, cutting individual squares from tarps, stadium cushions, lightweight wooden benches, or camp chairs.





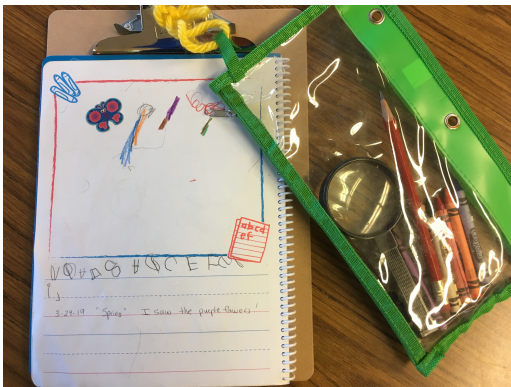
# Outdoor Learning and Eating at City Schools

## Infrastructure and Equipment, con't

**Weather protection:** Look for naturally-occurring shade from trees and buildings. Also consider pop-up tents or hanging a shade cloth.



**Teaching supplies:** Clipboards are exceptionally useful - students can use them to complete an assignment, draw their observations or write a poem. Portable whiteboard/chalkboards can be helpful; a laminated sheet of poster-size white paper can be a lightweight, cheap solution. Carts with wheels can help transport materials to and from the outdoor space. Storage cabinets with a combination lock reduce the amount of things to carry back and forth. Content-specific materials can be helpful, such as a wind vane, a thermometer, or a sundial.



**Boundaries:** Consider how you will delineate the edges of your education and meal space. Are there clear natural boundaries or a fence that make it obvious where students should and should not be? If not, using flags, traffic cones, or stakes with rope to mark out the space can give students a visual clue when you issue instructions.





# Outdoor Learning and Eating at City Schools

## Plan, Promote and Coordinate

You may find high demand for the outdoor space on nice days.

- Gather a group of teachers, administrators, and parents to review options, identify needs, and develop a plan.
- Share resources and ideas with colleagues.
- Inform parents of plans to utilize the outdoors, explaining the benefits and safety protocols.
- Create a basic campus map that outlines available space(s) with pathways to and from. Download a map from Google and mark it up digitally or by hand.
- Create a sign-up system so everyone can plan for using specific spaces.
- Consider asking specialists, para-educators, administrators and librarians to take small groups of students while lead teachers teach other students.
- Non-formal educators may be available to assist with outdoor learning as well.



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## The research shows: getting outside has lots of benefits

### Academic benefits

Students were more engaged and less distracted after lessons in a natural outdoor setting compared to classroom-based lessons. [citation](#)

School garden activity may promote science equity and help close the achievement gap between more-privileged and less-privileged students. [citation](#)



### Mental health benefits

Access to natural environments can benefit children in various ways, including improvements in confidence, social interactions, cognitive development, academic achievement, and emotional well-being. [citation](#)



### Physical benefits

Green school grounds improve the quantity and quality of elementary school children's physical activity. [citation](#)

### Teacher benefits

An hour or two of outdoor learning every week increases teachers' job satisfaction. [citation](#)



# Outdoor Learning and Eating at City Schools

## Virus Prevention

Although the increased air flow outdoors helps to mitigate the risk of virus transmission, staff and students should still observe health and safety standards. See the current [City Schools Health & Safety Procedures](#).

- Wash hands before going outside and upon returning to the classroom.
- Avoid sharing materials. Ensure sufficient materials for every student, and minimize the sharing of instructional items across cohorts of students.
- Students and staff may take a mask break when outdoors.
- High touch surfaces made of plastic or metal should be cleaned routinely. Cleaning and disinfection of wooden surfaces (play structures, benches, tables) is not recommended.
- Designate areas for each group, so that no more than one group is occupying a given space or using the same play equipment at the same time.
- Designate specific entry and exit points for student groups leaving and entering the school. This ensures school staff is aware of staff, students, or visitors coming and going from the outdoor sites.



## Resources, Ideas & Support

Scan the QR code or visit <http://Bit.ly/BCPSSOutdoorLearning> for a website with additional resources about outdoor learning and outdoor meals. Let us know if you plan to bring your students outside! And please contact us with requests for assistance, questions and suggestions at [Green@bcps.k12.md.us](mailto:Green@bcps.k12.md.us). An interdisciplinary group of staff and teachers is promoting outdoor learning and meals at City Schools.

This work supports City Schools' [Sustainability Plan](#) and Baltimore's [Cities Connecting Children to Nature](#) effort. See also [www.baltimorecityschools.org/sustainability](http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/sustainability) and the [Sustainability Resources google drive](#).



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