

POLICY BRIEF

# Programming for Our Future: The Importance of Youth Outdoor Education

**ACTNOW**

Afterschool for Children & Teens

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# Overview

Outdoor or Environmental Education is a sector of education devoted to learning about nature around us and ways in which we can engage with it. This includes climate issues, skills needed for the outdoors, and natural sciences. There are many benefits – physical, mental, and emotional – for outdoor education. Connecting with nature and learning more about the world around us helps people gain valuable perspectives and problem-solving skills that apply to many areas of their lives. For issues specifically influencing youth education (overuse of screens, mental health, etc.) outdoor education provides an answer. However, despite these proven benefits<sup>1</sup>, there is a large opportunity gap in access to outdoor and environmental education for youth and beyond. We must work to provide all youth with access to the education they need to feel confident in the outdoors and allow them to reap the benefits that come from the physical environment. Increasing access to outdoor and environmental education by improving funding for the development of the topic and access to resources to support education programs is essential.



57.3%

of people above the age of 6  
participated in Outdoor Recreation  
in 2023, a 4.1% increase from 2022<sup>2</sup>

# What is Outdoor Ed?

Outdoor and Environmental Education has a variety of meanings in different contexts. Some commonalities are the relation to nature, and the many benefits gained through it. Outdoor and environmental education in the literal sense, means learning about nature. In some circumstances, this means natural sciences, and learning more about the climate. In others, this means learning the skills needed in the outdoors and rustic settings. Frequently, a barrier to people participating in outdoor activities is a lack of knowledge. **As there are unique skills needed to participate in most outdoor activities, without specific programmed education teaching people the skills, people cannot participate in the activity.** For example, climbing is a popular outdoor activity. In addition to the many resources needed to climb like rope, harness, helmet, and climbing shoes, there are lots of skills like tying knots, belaying, and rigging a climbing route, that are not taught in other facets of life, so specific lessons are needed for people to climb. Preparing to participate in outdoor activities and be in rustic settings requires specific sets of knowledge and experience that aren't available to everyone, decreasing the opportunities for others to participate.



**Learning about  
natural sciences**

**Outdoor  
recreation  
education**

**Outdoor  
classrooms**

**These barriers can be combatted with increased funding for opportunities for youth to engage in outdoor education.** Because of the difficulty of starting new outdoor activities, education and accessibility to it is necessary. **Additionally, not all outdoor activities come with a high price tag or extensive knowledge needed.** Outdoor activities such as hiking are accessible to many and can be implemented into physical education courses when more expensive materials aren't available.

An additional definition of outdoor education is bringing the classroom to an outdoor setting. This could be applied to any classroom and offers students more experience in the outdoors and natural environments. As a more applicable option for most classrooms, this form of outdoor education should be applied to as many classrooms as possible. With the benefits of the outdoors, this lack of opportunity is something we should take seriously and motivate policymakers to as well.

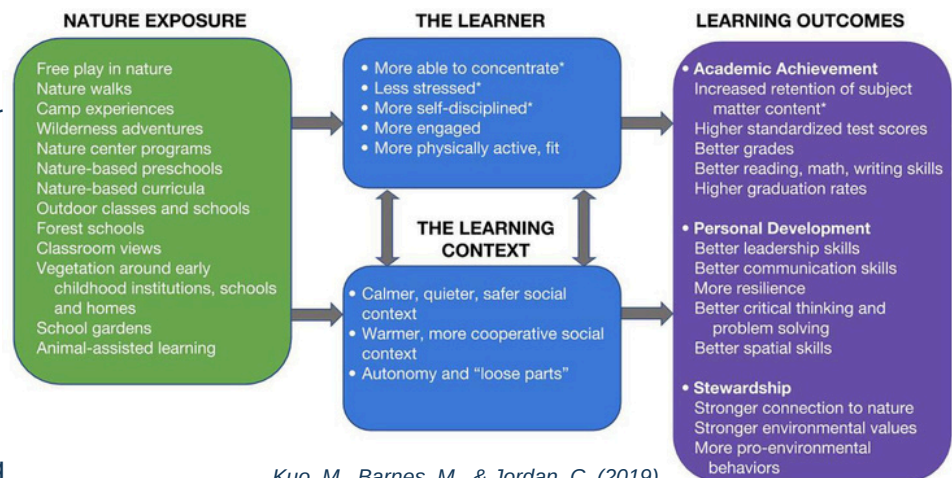


# Why is Outdoor Ed Important?

## ACADEMICALLY

Outdoor and environmental education has a variety of benefits, contributing to many different areas of people's lives. One of importance, particularly in the education field, is the effects it can have on academic performance. With the proposed implementation of outdoor education potentially interrupting traditional learning settings, it is a valid concern to question outdoor education's consequences on academics. Fortunately, outdoor education has plenty of academic benefits. A brief composed by academics from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the University of Minnesota covers various studies on the effects of outdoor education. They found that outdoor education increases academic achievement, personal development, and environmental stewardship. The outdoor setting was found to have rejuvenating effects on attention, relieve stress, boost self-discipline, increase student motivation, enjoyment, and engagement, increase levels of physical

activity and fitness, create calmer and safer contexts for learning, and foster more cooperative relations. They compose a theory regarding why exposure to nature during education helps with learning, breaking

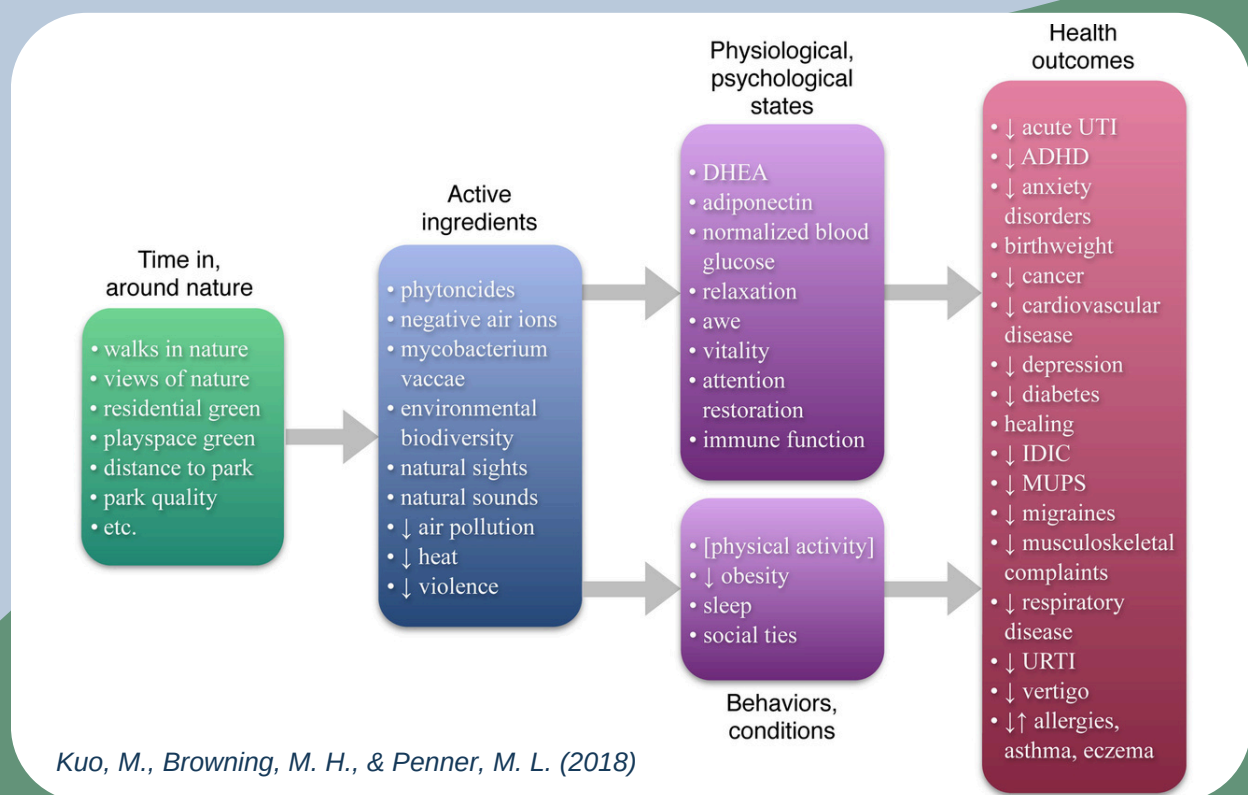


*Kuo, M., Barnes, M., & Jordan, C. (2019)*

it into the influence directly on the learner and the learning context.<sup>1</sup> The figure above describes this theory. Outdoor education helps learners directly by contributing to their engagement and physical activity, and it additionally provides a great learning environment, specifically supporting students who may not thrive in the traditional academic setting. The academic benefits are supported again by research done by the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. In their matched pair designed study with half the students in a nature-based classroom and the other half in a traditional classroom, they found that in 48 out of 100 comparisons, the students in nature classrooms performed a full standard deviation better than those in the traditional classroom.<sup>3</sup>

## HEALTH BENEFITS

Time spent in the outdoor classroom also has proven physical, mental, and emotional health benefits.<sup>3</sup> The figure below demonstrates a theory of the relationship between nature and our health, showing the connection between hormones and muscular health, and how that benefits us. While supporting the students in learning in a non-traditional classroom, outdoor education provides real health benefits. Youth mental health is increasingly becoming a problem– the United States Surgeon General recognized the crisis worsening with the COVID-19 Pandemic.<sup>4</sup> Outdoor education has the potential to help youth by providing an environment that has proven to support their mental health.



## SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

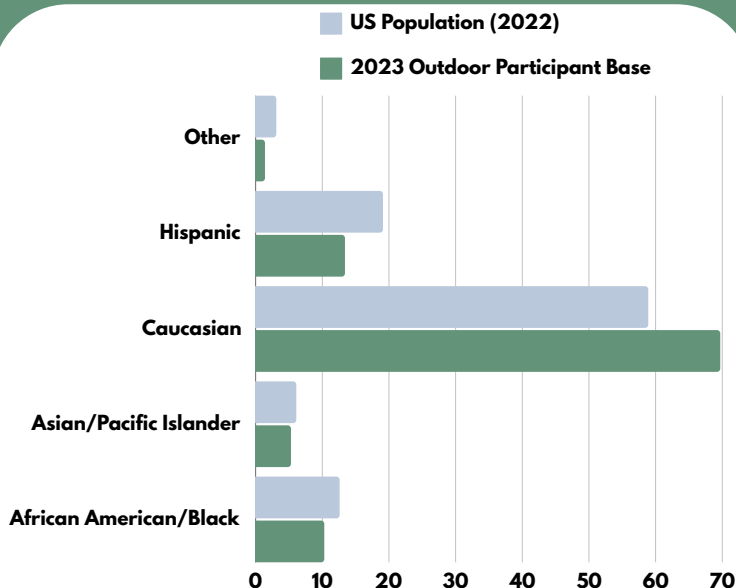
Additionally, outdoor education supports students' socio-emotional learning (SEL). After the COVID-19 pandemic, SEL has gained increasing importance as students who learned how to do school online transitioned to traditional in-person classrooms. However, even these traditional in-person classrooms have increased their use of screens. A study done in 2014 explored the effects of outdoor education on SEL and found that students who attended a five-day outdoor education program returned with better abilities to pick up on emotional cues.<sup>5</sup> While outdoor education does not always look like a fully immersive five-day excursion, the benefits of being outside are made clear here.

## ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Furthermore, outdoor education also increases environmental stewardship among youth.<sup>6</sup> Because of the harm humans have caused throughout history that has gotten us to where we are environmentally with the climate crisis, we must raise a generation that cares about our effect on the natural world.<sup>7</sup> Youth are already very involved in climate advocacy,<sup>8</sup> and outdoor education is a great avenue for increasing their involvement. Having youth connect with nature and learn about it through outdoor education programs strengthens not only their feelings about nature but also their knowledge of how to properly care for it.<sup>9</sup> Developing stewardship in youth has the potential to greatly help the environment by fostering positive habits of engaging with nature, like picking up trash, practicing Leave No Trace Principles,<sup>10</sup> and working towards more healthy consumption and waste practices.

# State of Outdoor Ed

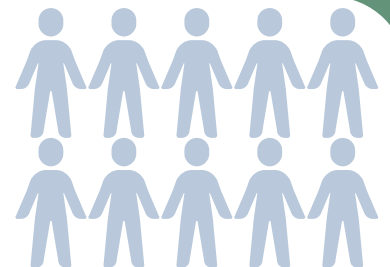
**New and younger outdoor rec participants are the most racially diverse.<sup>2</sup>**



2024 Outdoor Participation Trends Report. (2024)

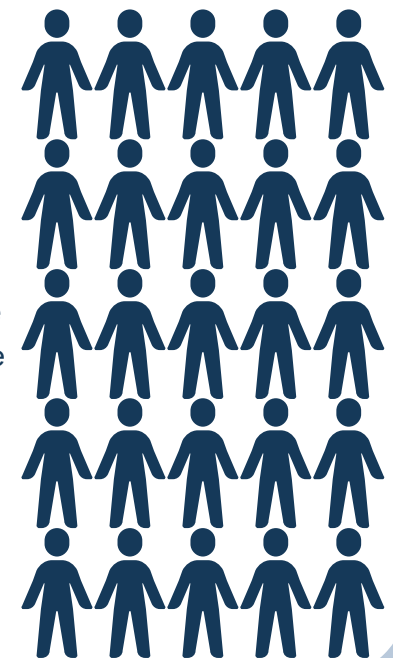
**10,000<sup>11</sup>  
Children**

served by nature  
preschools in the  
United States in  
2017



**25,000  
Children**

served by nature  
preschools in the  
United States in  
2022



# Case Study: Outdoor Ed in Illinois<sup>12</sup>

Out-of-School Time (OST) is a great setting for outdoor education. For instance, many of the practices of outdoor education are not conducive to the traditional educational setting. OST provides flexibility in programmatic offerings but also maintains impact and connection with youth. Vienna High School in Vienna, Illinois, provides an example of a school providing opportunities for outdoor education in the OST setting.



Vienna, Illinois is a town in Southern Illinois located two hours away from any metropolitan area but very close to the Shawnee National Forest. They partnered with a camp near them to increase students' exposure to the outdoors and opportunities to receive OST programming. Their program is a great example of the power of outdoor education.

Partnering with Camp Ondessonk, Vienna High School offers OST programming for its students. Activities at the camp included tutoring for their school work as well as outdoor recreational activities. 80-120 students participated in the program, and the results showed evidence that outdoor education helps students in many ways.

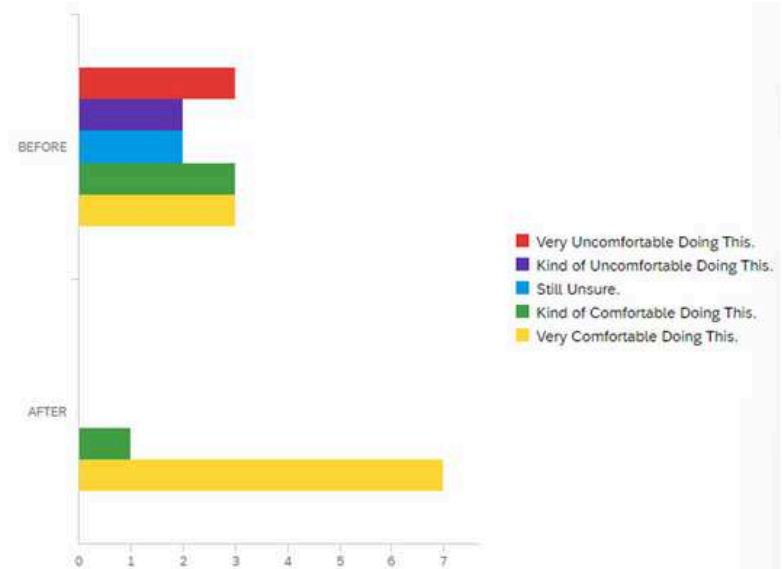
For some students, this was academic. The tutoring after school provided them with the academic support they needed. **For others, the impact was unique in how it manifested and demonstrated how special outdoor education can be for students.**



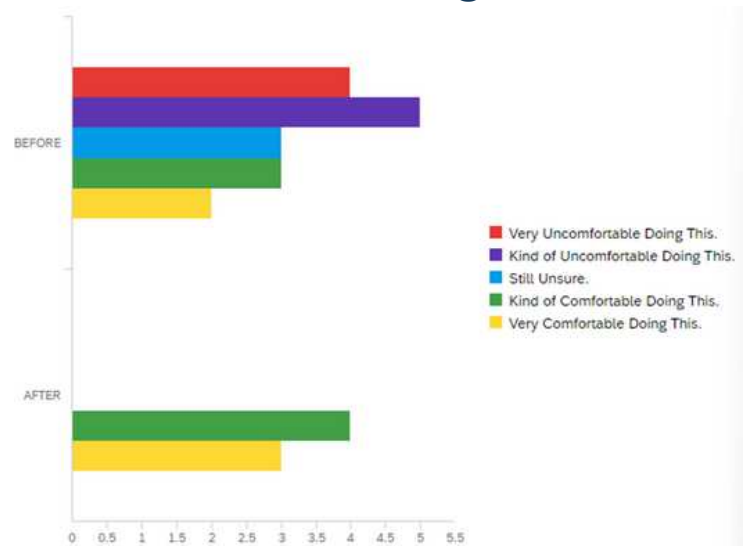
Dr. Evan Coulson is the Adventure and Group Services Director at Camp Ondessonk. One of his goals with this program was to teach students about the outdoors and help them realize their own strengths, in and out of the outdoor setting. As previously noted, the outdoors can be intimidating to many who have not been taught about it. The youth in Vienna did not disagree. The figures to the right show survey results from Vienna students regarding their comfort levels with hiking and climbing. Before the program in both activities, the majority of students ranked these activities as below their comfort zone. This demonstrates the nerves that can surround the outdoors without the proper education available. After, however, not a single student ranked these activities as below their comfort levels. Almost all students reported being "very comfortable doing this."

Dr. Coulson hoped that teaching these students that they can overcome these obstacles of fear and anxiety could help students replicate overcoming other challenges in their lives. Instilling confidence in children learning new things helps them in other areas of their lives. Believing in themselves in this new and nerve-wracking setting helps them understand how they can work towards goals and learn new things in other facets of their lives. Outdoor education provides students with these opportunities to build confidence and strength.

## Youth Hiking Comfort



## Youth Climbing Comfort



*Coulson, E. & Hosfeldt, P. (2023)*

These programs did more than teach students, they built community. The program increased student's sense of belonging to their school, even as an OST program. When asked if participating in the program influenced their sense of belonging at their high school, one student reported

**“Yes, I am new here and it helped me meet more people and see that people care.”**

Many other students reported that it helped them find others that enjoyed things like them, and gave them more community in the school.

The program also helped participating youth see a future in the field. The program aimed to show students careers and paths to pursue in the outdoor field. With so much of their surrounding area being natural space, this program opened their eyes to the possibilities that lie around their community. Other students reported:

**“[The program] helped me get to know the place I live in so much more than I did before. In turn helped me find my sense of place in it.”**

**“I liked being outside. It really opened my eyes to what nature could offer”**



Vienna's Outdoor Education program is an example of how impactful outdoor programs can be for youth. By exposing youth to the outdoors, program providers are giving students the opportunity to develop important skills and experiences that can transfer not only to their future but to their confidence and sense of belonging. Vienna additionally offers a perspective on how outdoor education can be implemented in the OST space. While offering this immersive experience can be challenging in the traditional school-time environment, OST is uniquely positioned to provide the flexibility needed for experiential learning programs.



# Our Future is Now

Outdoor education gives students unique opportunities to engage with their academics in a different setting, build skills, strengthen SEL competencies, build community, and increase environmental stewardship. However, despite all of these benefits, the majority of the outdoor education field lies inaccessible to youth either due to location or cost. For the location, recognizing the capability of many different spaces to implement outdoor education is crucial. Making resources available and encouraging the use of more programs can increase the amount of youth who have access to the benefits that outdoor education provides. Programs should be made more accessible to all despite costs by increasing the funding available. Outdoor education puts learners first in a way that is unique to environmental education. We must prioritize the form of education, especially because of the state of the environment currently. Every community is being affected by climate change, and increasing the outdoor education that our youth receive reflects the importance of the natural world around us.

**Investing in youth and their ability to positively engage with the environment is investing in our future. A future where we still have a natural world to appreciate.**



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## Thank you

ACT Now would like to thank Vienna High School for contributing to this project by sharing data and personal experiences. ACT Now would also like to thank Emily Waechtler for her research on outdoor education and her policy insights.

# Appendix: Educational Resources for Outdoor Ed

## Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (IEPA)

The IEPA has built a curriculum to teach youth about the environment. From littering, to energy, to pond life, find resources to add to lessons about the environment and how youth interact with the nature around them.

## University of Minnesota Extension

Here, the University of Minnesota Extension compiles a list of what effective Outdoor Education looks like, and some tips for program staff. When starting to implement outdoor education into your program, check out their site for support in doing so.

## Melanin Basecamp

Melanin Basecamp offers a wide variety of resources for how to support Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in outdoor education. Check out their articles to learn more about ways in which programs can support accessibility and equity in the space, and also find similar programs around the country doing great work!

## Environmental Education Association of Illinois (EEAI)

The EEA has many resources on how to devote federal and state funding to environmental education. Additionally, they have tips for programs, guides for activities, and trainings for professionals. Check out their resources here.

## Learning Through Landscapes

Learning Through Landscapes' online website provides many free outdoor lesson ideas to browse through. They provide options for all age groups and subject areas such as History, Literacy and Language, Math, Science, Physical Education, and more. Their activities and lessons were created by educators and are suitable for any kind of outdoor learning, including curriculum-led ones. Each activity includes equipment lists, a step-by-step of the activity, questions to check for understanding, and the learning outcomes.