Georgia's Outdoor Classroom Symposium

How Georgia educators have developed the most successful outdoor classroom movement on the continent

by Karen Garland

Surveys have shown that one of the biggest barriers to outdoor education is that many classroom teachers are not comfortable taking their students outdoors or feel they lack the time to do so. In response, many education and conservation organizations have spearheaded efforts to assist teachers and administrators in converting schoolyards into natural areas with outdoor classrooms.

Ten years ago, a handful of organizations in Georgia went one step further: Sharing a vision of having an outdoor learning center created and used by every school in Georgia, they banded together and created the Outdoor Classroom Council. Since its inception, the council's main activity has been to organize an annual Outdoor Classroom Symposium where teachers learn how to create and maintain outdoor learning centers and to link outdoor learning with their curriculum. One measure of the symposium's success is that Georgia today has more schoolyard habitat areas certified by the National Wildlife Federation than any other state.

The Outdoor Classroom Council is a working committee of the Environmental Education Alliance of Georgia (EEA), a professional education organization and affiliate of the North American Association for Environmental Education. The council's 15 partners represent a range of organizations, including statewide and regional environmental non-profits, county and state governments, and private industry. They include local nature centers, museums, and zoos; Adopt-a-Stream affiliates; Project WET, Project WILD, and Project Learning Tree coordinators; and representatives from Parent Teacher Associations, the National Park Service, the Environmental Protection Division, and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. As an all-volunteer committee, the council welcomes any individual or organization that can provide financial resources or time and energy to assist with increasing numbers of participants from surrounding states and as far away as Kansas, Wisconsin, and Virginia. Sixty percent of attendees are from schools that have sent other teachers before and are seeking to expose as many of their staff as possible to the benefits of outdoor teaching. Having an opportunity to meet presenters from various organizations, discover new resources, and exchange ideas with other teachers gives participants the confidence that they too can succeed. Simply put, the annual symposium connects people to resources that they might never otherwise learn about. By providing educational and networking opportunities, it has become a catalyst for collaboration between classroom teachers, administrators, parents, scout leaders and other non-formal educators in the development of outdoor classrooms as safe, multi-functional, educational areas for all to enjoy.

Symposium program

The symposium program includes over 35 concurrent sessions that actively engage participants in learning how to develop outdoor classrooms as rich learning environments. Overall, the presentations demonstrate that outdoor classrooms are perfect settings for hands-on, real-world learning opportunities that are both fun and educational.

There are sessions for all interests and all levels of experience, whether the participants are in the beginning stages...
of creating an outdoor classroom or have been using one for many years. Sessions in art, mathematics, science, history, geography, and language arts help to establish that an outdoor classroom is an aid to teaching more than science (past evaluations have indicated that this is a strong selling point for administrators). Topics have ranged from winter gardening, weather, amphibians, migration, geology, and lichens to orienteering, journaling, composting, insects, bogs, starting outdoor classrooms, and applying for grants. Organizers have made a particular effort to include sessions on how to use outdoor learning areas in each of the four seasons, especially during the winter when plants and insects are dormant.

Winter sessions have included weather, orienteering, winter bird and tree identification, galls, and wildlife tracking.

Most presenters provide ideas on how to integrate outdoor activities into instructional objectives, and show how those activities correlate with the state education standards. In their evaluations, participants often point out that without having been shown how to incorporate the ideas and activities into their lesson plans, they would have felt overwhelmed by having to take on “one more project.” Instead, they return to their schools or education centers feeling more confident and motivated.

**Planning committees**

Much planning is done each year to ensure that the symposium is a success and, as with most conferences, the committee follows basic guidelines. Knowing their own strengths and interests, committee members choose which of the several subcommittees they would like to assist with. These include the following: program planning, brochure design, printing and mailing, public relations, exhibits, outdoor classroom store, food, resources for totebags, registration, evaluations, session moderators, website updates, signage, and audio-visual equipment. The program planners’ work begins early with the search for unique and engaging presenters, while other subcommittees, such as those ordering lunch or creating signage, can begin months later.

**Checklist for a successful symposium**

**Planning:** Planning for the next year’s event begins immediately after the current symposium, when problems and new ideas are still fresh in everyone’s minds and can be discussed and addressed in the next symposium.

Finding a suitable venue is probably the biggest hurdle each year. A suitable venue has to have space large enough to accommodate numerous concurrent sessions, an auditorium or similar room for opening and closing remarks, areas for lunch and exhibits, and parking. Perhaps most important, it must have outdoor areas for presentations so that teachers can learn first-hand how to implement new ideas and activities. Because of a very limited budget, the council looks for venues that will provide services at no charge or for a small fee.

For the past five years the symposium has rotated around the state, so that more teachers could be exposed to the benefits of outdoor teaching. The locations have included a botanical garden, a zoo, a 4-H center, a college campus, and an elementary school. Participants most enjoyed the elementary school because it had over a dozen different outdoor teaching areas that could be used for sessions. (Had the weather been inclement, the presenters could have used indoor classrooms that had been reserved.) The symposium was planned to coincide with a teachers’ professional development day when the students were not in school, and this freed organizers from having to work around the students’ schedule and space requirements.
Scheduling: While the symposium has been held on various weekdays, evaluations have shown that a majority of participants prefer Fridays. Several years ago, the one-day event was expanded for those desiring professional credit or a more in-depth look at a specific topic. To serve these purposes, a four-hour workshop on Thursday evening and an all-day Saturday workshop have been added.

Exhibits: As with most conferences, an exhibit area provides access to resources, ideas, and networking opportunities that participants might not otherwise have known existed. Exhibitors include not only statewide and local nonprofit organizations and government agencies, but also private industries and businesses, such as landscaping suppliers and book retailers who sell field guides, how-to books, and curriculum guides.

To ensure that participants become engaged in the exhibit area rather than simply picking up whatever free resources are available, the council has created an "Exhibitor Scavenger Hunt." Exhibitors each submit one question that can be answered only by visiting their exhibit. The activity enables participants to learn more about the educational resources available to them. As an incentive, all participants who hand in a completed scavenger hunt form receive a free resource for their outdoor classroom, such as a bluebird house, a book on creating wildlife habitat, or a curriculum.

Fees and finances: Sensitive to the toll that budgetary cuts have taken on professional training for educators, the committee limits the registration fee to $50 in order to attract large numbers of teachers. That fee includes breakfast, lunch, snacks, and a tote bag full of free resources. Additional fees are charged for the Thursday evening and Saturday workshops. Grants have allowed the council to bring in special keynote speakers and national workshop presenters. The symposium is budgeted to break even, and to help defray costs the council brainstorms creative fundraising ideas, such as holding silent auctions. Last year participants were invited to donate educational resources they no longer needed to a "habitat" flea market. Thus one person's junk became another's treasure, and additional funds were raised to help to support the event.

Public relations: The council feels that it is very important that all Georgians be made aware of the importance of outdoor learning centers to both education and the environment. Therefore, as part of its public relations campaign, the Outdoor Classroom Council has worked with the governor's office for the past four years to have the day of the symposium proclaimed "Outdoor Classroom Education Day in Georgia." The proclamation not only raises public awareness, but also adds legitimacy to the symposium and to outdoor learning that is influential with school superintendents, principals, and program directors.

Awards: Several years ago, the Outdoor Classroom Council created an annual "Outdoor Classroom Service Award" to acknowledge the hard work of a school or individual who has made a significant contribution to the promotion, creation, use, or maintenance of outdoor learning areas. The award not only recognizes the tremendous work being done throughout the state, but also has become a motivational tool. The nominations process for the award is promoted at the symposium as well as through the Georgia Parent Teacher Association, the Environmental Education Alliance of Georgia, and other statewide professional teacher organizations. The award is presented during a formal ceremony at the Environmental Education Alliance's annual conference in conjunction with other EEA awards.

Ongoing support: Throughout the year, the council provides ongoing support through the EEA website (www.eealliance.org) to anyone interested in outdoor classrooms. Symposium participants often comment that they missed important information because too many good sessions were offered at the same time. The council has responded to this by posting an annual resource guide that includes activities and handouts from all the symposium presenters.

Georgia's leadership in outdoor education has not come about by accident. It is the direct result of the combined efforts of many dedicated individuals and organizations, and, of course, the Outdoor Classroom Council. The annual Outdoor Classroom Symposium has provided the spark that many teachers need to appreciate the value of transforming their schoolyards into outdoor learning areas, and has given them hands-on assistance in getting started. Just as important, it has created a large network of educators sharing ideas and experience. Like a pebble dropped in water, the Outdoor Classroom Council and its annual symposium are creating ripples leading to positive change in students' lives.

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