Sustaining Outdoor Classrooms

How to keep your outdoor classroom from becoming a forgotten and abandoned bed of weeds

by Amanda Kail

Since the 1990s the state of Georgia has been a leader in the outdoor classroom movement. Yet a 2003 study by the Georgia Wildlife Federation found that 41 percent of the more than 1,000 schoolyard habitat projects in the state had been abandoned. Of these, over 80 percent had fallen into disuse by the end of their second year. Follow-up interviews by the Federation revealed that the main reasons projects had been abandoned were (in order of frequency cited) difficulty maintaining the site, inability or uncertainty among teachers about how to use the outdoor classroom in their lessons, inadequate funding, vandalism (especially at high schools), and loss of the site due to school expansion or relocation. On the other hand, successful schools who were able to sustain their outdoor classrooms over many years cited the following reasons for their project’s longevity: continued community support (volunteer labor, expertise, and donations), direct student involvement, funding, teacher training, and administrative support.

The abandonment of any outdoor classroom represents a considerable waste of money, human energy, and educational potential. Most outdoor classroom projects are undertaken with limited funding, mostly from small grants and donations that require a great deal of time on the part of teachers and volunteers to secure. In the outdoor classroom projects studied by the Federation, record-keeping was scarce, and it was not uncommon to find schools where staff members were building new outdoor classrooms, unaware of previous projects already on their campus. (“Is that what those raised beds full of weeds and broken benches in the courtyard were for?”) Instead of maintaining or developing an already-existing outdoor classroom, tremendous energy and resources were being used to start new projects. This reinvention of the wheel can drain financial resources and volunteer energy.

Of course the most important reasons for sustaining schoolyard projects are pedagogical and ecological. In order to gain a deep understanding of the cycles of life, students need to spend time outdoors through every season and over many years. This allows them to witness the transformation of dormant stalks to blooming gardens and to note the arrivals and departures of migratory wildlife that mark the calendar of the natural world. An outdoor classroom can facilitate this process over time, helping students to develop a stronger sense of place. Outdoor classrooms with natural areas also provide good, reliable habitat for wildlife. This is especially important for migratory species such as birds, which may benefit greatly from — and even rely upon — schoolyard habitats, particularly in urban areas.

Building sustainability

Schools are dynamic by nature. Parents seldom continue to volunteer at a school after their children have graduated. Teachers and administrators transfer to other schools or careers with some frequency. School systems in urbanizing areas must constantly expand their facilities and build new schools to meet growing populations. All of these elements
of change are intrinsic to schools. In such a challenging environment, how do schools create outdoor classrooms that will be well-used over the long term? The following are some of the keys to sustainability.

Redefine the outdoor classroom as an important tool for teaching and learning. First and foremost, outdoor classrooms should be designed so that their use is easily integrated into pre-existing curricula. Often thought of as “extras” — extraneous projects that serve only to beautify a campus or pet projects of individual teachers — outdoor classrooms are actually highly effective tools for learning. Compelling research by the State Education and Environment Roundtable indicates that using the environment as an integrating context for learning can greatly improve students’ academic performance, standardized test scores, and behavior. But teachers need training and support in order to integrate use of an outdoor classroom into their curriculum. Many nature centers and environmental education centers offer affordable, cross-curricular, and academically sound training and curricula to help teachers of all disciplines gain the competence and confidence they need to take their lessons outdoors. This first step assists in gaining administrative support and greatly improves teachers’ ability to be involved.

Create outdoor classrooms that are easy to maintain. If an outdoor classroom is too difficult or costly to maintain, it is unlikely that it will be maintained. Maintenance must be taken into consideration before construction begins. If the need for regular watering during summer will present a challenge, consider container gardens. Small and, more importantly, mobile, they can be relocated in case of construction or sent home for the summer for watering. Another low-maintenance plan is to create an outdoor classroom by reclaiming an unused section of the school’s lawn and simply letting nature take its course. Request permission to quit mowing an area and see what happens. A simple mowed or mulched path and an attractive split-rail fence can provide access and a defined border for the area. Having students watching as lawn turns to meadow is an excellent lesson in succession. No purchase of plants, no watering, no maintenance (beyond a basic path) and — voila! — wildlife habitat.

Involve the students from the very beginning. Many teachers justly fear having to take on yet another extracurricular responsibility. However, much of the planning, maintenance, and enhancement of an outdoor classroom can be done by students as classroom activities, thereby removing the bulk of the burden from teachers. Students can create outdoor classroom designs, research native flora and fauna, and monitor wildlife as a part of their regular lessons. They can also, with adult supervision, build and maintain the outdoor classroom. Involving students from the beginning will help them develop a sense of ownership over the project, often directly reducing the incidence of vandalism. Whether on purpose or by accident, plants are less likely to be trampled, feeders broken, and trees carved if the students have had an active hand in the planting and construction.

Keep records. To avoid reinventing the wheel, keep central records of community supporters, volunteers, grants and donations, events, maintenance issues, and observations. An outdoor classroom scrapbook is invaluable to anyone who is taking on an already-existing project. Make sure the scrapbook stays at the school.

Think of outdoor classrooms as long-term, constantly evolving projects. Many teachers and non-formal educators wish to transform an entire campus into gardens, ponds, and other wonderful natural features. However, outdoor classrooms have a greater chance of long-term sustainability if they evolve slowly. Smaller projects are easier to complete; and the more people who have a hand in making the outdoor classroom happen, the greater the level of support. Create an outdoor classroom committee with an annually rotating membership representing all of the stakeholders. The continually changing and diversified involvement will help to ensure that the outdoor classroom is meeting the needs of its users, year by year.

In an increasingly urban world, outdoor classrooms are vital links between students and the natural world. By providing opportunities for close daily contact with nature, they can play an important role in creating a knowledgeable and conservation-minded populace with a sense of environmental stewardship. By giving just a little more thought to the planning process, we can create outdoor classrooms that will be around to continue that mission for many years to come.

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