

Growing the Outdoor Classroom Movement: Creating an Outdoor Classroom Symposium

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According to National Wildlife Federation, Georgia is the leading state with over 362 certified schoolyard habitats. However, the state also host many more outdoor learning centers that are not certified. What is Georgia's secret to this successful initiative?

When considering ways to counter the effects of environmental isolation sometimes the simplest of plans are the most profound. Simply stated, why not take education outdoors?! However, informal surveys have shown that many classroom teachers are not comfortable or feel they have the time to take their students outdoors.

Concern for this isolation has led many education and conservation groups across the country to, individually or as small-scale partnerships, spearhead efforts to assist teachers and administrators into converting schoolyards into nature-based outdoor classrooms for students. However, one of the states at the forefront of initiating these efforts on a grand-scale is Georgia, who is leading the way of the schoolyard outdoor classroom movement. Through highly successful initiatives that are literally gaining ground across the state, its programs are exposing many educators and organizations into recognizing the value of teaching students outdoors.

On the front lines to assist with this crusade is the Georgia Outdoor Classroom Council (OCC), a unique and creative initiative of the Environmental Education Alliance of Georgia (EEA). EEA is the Georgia professional education and networking affiliate of the North American Association for Environmental Education. Georgia educators are fortunate in

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Organized in 1996 the Outdoor Classroom Council was originally a collaboration between the DeKalb County Cooperative Extension Service, the Atlanta Botanical Garden, and the Georgia Forestry Commission who had an idea to bring together parents, teachers, and administrators in the hopes that they would provide feedback in what resources they needed from environmental organizations if they were succeed in taking education outdoors. After much input from the participants the idea of the Outdoor Classroom Symposium was born with a mission to serve teachers, parents, principals, and community volunteers as a resource link, providing up-to-date training and literature on building, utilizing, and maintaining outdoor classrooms.

Prior to the "symposium" concept the Georgia outdoor classroom movement was disorganized, with many organizations feeling overwhelmed at the daunting task of trying to individually educate teachers on the benefits of teaching outdoors. Because of this many parts of the state were not aware of the available resources or benefits of such outdoor learning techniques.

For numerous years the Georgia Department of Education (DOE) provided small grants for Georgia schools to use towards outdoor classrooms. The Council's role in outdoor education continued to grow when they were invited to assist the Georgia DOE in reviewing the grants that were received and also determining which schools should be awarded the funds. Therefore, the symposium became a great springboard to assist teachers who were interesting in applying for a grant to participate in the grant writing session with tips on how to successfully fill out their Georgia outdoor classroom grant application. However, due to state budgets cuts several years ago the grant funds evaporated. Knowing how important these funds were the Council continues to work year after year to have them reinstated back into the state budget.

that not only does EEA host an annual environmental education conference in the spring, but the Outdoor Classroom Council also host the highly successful Outdoor Classroom Symposium in the fall, so that educators throughout the state have an opportunity to specifically learn how to create, utilize, and maintain their outdoor learning centers, while at the same time making the connection to the curriculum and overall benefits these settings have to student learning.

Throughout the environmental education community it is known that the key to a successful outdoor classroom includes, not only teacher participation, but also support from the school administrators, citizens, businesses, environmental organizations, and government agencies. Community support comes in many forms including funding, teacher in-service training, technical help, equipment, expert labor, materials, and more.

Therefore, through educational and networking opportunities the symposium becomes a catalyst for classroom teachers, administrators, PTA members, parents, scout leaders, and other nonformal educators to collaborate with one another with the development, utilization, and maintenance of their outdoor classroom areas, so that they have a safe, multi-functional, educational area for all to enjoy. Having an opportunity to meet presenters representing numerous environmental agencies, vendors or exhibitors that can provide additional resources, and exchanging ideas with other schools that have successfully created outdoor classrooms shows participants how they too can be triumphant. It is simply connecting people to the available resources that they might not have otherwise known existed.

Celebrating its tenth anniversary with connecting teachers to the benefits of teaching outdoors, the Council has grown to include over 15 partner organizations from throughout the state that share the same vision of wanting to see an outdoor learning center created and used by *every* school in Georgia. This unique statewide collaboration has not only been part of the success of the annual symposium, but also the continued growth of the outdoor classroom movement throughout the state, as each of the partners continues to promote the creation and utilization of outdoor learning centers long after the annual event through their individual organizations.

Partners represent a range of organizations including statewide and regional environmental non-profits, county and state governments, and private industry, including local nature centers, museums, and zoos, Adopt-a Stream affiliates, Project WET, Project WILD, and Project Learning Tree coordinators, representatives from Parent Teacher Associations, the National Park Service, Environmental Protection Division, and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. Being a working committee, that is strictly volunteer, the Council welcomes any individual or organization that can provide financial resources, time, commitment, and/or energy in assisting with the planning and implementation of the annual event. Each partner brings their strengths to the committee with individual agendas set aside for the goal of creating a highly successful event that welcomes a number of teachers to an event that showcases the benefits of outdoor learning.

Through the years this highly successful event has continued to grow, welcoming over 275 participants from not only Georgia, but also other states, including Texas, Virginia, Alabama, Tennessee, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Wisconsin, and Kansas. The one-day symposium program has also grown to include over 35 multidisciplinary concurrent sessions that actively engage the participants and promote outdoor classroom techniques and ideas. The event helps establish that teaching in an outdoor classroom is more than just an aid to teaching science.

Through numerous interactive sessions, including art, mathematics, science, history, geography, and language arts, presenters from throughout the state with varied expertise come together to demonstrate to participants that these outdoors areas provide the perfect springboard for hands-on, real-world, experiential, outdoor learning opportunities in a fun and educational atmosphere. Past evaluations have reflected that this is a strong selling point for administrators. Therefore, the sessions that are listed in the registration brochure and program all contain symbols to represent which discipline areas will be covered in that particular presentation. Once again showing that teaching outdoor is more than just professional staff development for the science teacher.

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Past symposium evaluations have revealed that the over 60 percent of attendees are first-time participants, even though their schools have participated for several years. The reason is that schools, with their limited budgets, want to expose as many teachers to the benefits of outdoor teaching as they can.

Past symposium topics have ranged from winter gardening, weather, amphibians, migration, geology, and lichens to orienteering, journaling, composting, insects, bogs, outdoor classrooms 101, and grant writing. Depending on what stage of the outdoor classroom process the participants are involved in from those who are in the beginning stages of initiating an outdoor classroom at their schools to teachers who have been using one for numerous years and are looking for new ideas on how to teach outdoors, there is a session for all interests. All the evaluations reflect that everyone leaves the event feeling inspired, motivated, energized, and ready to take learning outdoors!

Participants have also stated numerous times that they not only want background information, but also ways that they can incorporate the topics into their lesson plans. Therefore, the session presenters supply the teachers with ideas on how to integrate outdoor activities into their school's instructional objectives, including correlations with the state educational standards. Teachers have shared numerous times that they appreciate being shown how to incorporate these ideas and activities into their lesson plans. Otherwise, they feel overwhelmed with the thought of one more project being placed on them. They return back to their schools or centers feeling more confident and motivated, which is one of the goals of OCC.

Georgia's successful outdoor classroom initiative however, cannot be exclusively linked to the fact that southern winters are milder than northern winters and therefore southern teachers have the ability to use their outdoor learning spaces several more weeks out of the year than their northern counterparts. The symposium has made a conscious effort to

ensure that these areas are utilized through each of the four seasons with specific sessions aimed at teaching through each of these times of the year, especially winter when plants are no longer growing and insects are dormant. For example, winter sessions have included galls, orienteering, winter bird identification, winter tree identification, weather, and wildlife tracking. There are numerous hands-on seasonal activities that students can participate in that are connected to the curriculum that ensure these areas can be active year-round learning centers and not just when teachers see the color green.

However, before the participants can even attend the wide array of educational sessions much preplanning must occur. Like the planning of most conferences, the committee follows basic guidelines that have led to numerous highly successful events over the past ten years. Council members, knowing their own strengths and interest, are welcome to choose which subcommittee they would like to assist with. Past subcommittees have included: program, brochure design, printing and mailing, public relations, exhibits, outdoor classroom store, food, resources for totebags, registration, evaluations, session moderators, website updates, signage, and A/V needs. Some of the subcommittee work begins immediately with the search for unique and engaging presenters, which leads to the completion of the registration brochure. Other subcommittees have several months before they must begin, such as those ordering lunch or creating signage.

The Council's Checklist of Ideas for a Successful Symposium

- √ The committee begins the planning process for the next year's event immediately after the conclusion of the current symposium. This way problems that have arisen or ideas that have formulated are still fresh in everyone's minds and can be shared constructively with the entire group.

- √ The next task is probably one of the biggest hurdles the Council has to overcome each year. It is locating a suitable venue for the upcoming symposium that has space large enough to accommodate numerous concurrent sessions, has an auditorium-type room for opening and closing remarks, lunch, and exhibits, and has an outdoor space that presenters can utilize during their sessions, plus sufficient parking. Having an outdoor space for presenters to use has been found to be extremely important, as teachers want to see first-hand how to implement some of the ideas and activities.

Because of a very limited budget the Council strives to locate venues that will provide services at no charge or as in some instances a very small per person fee. For the past five years the committee has succeeded in rotating the event to other parts of the state, so that even more teachers could be exposed to the benefits of outdoor teaching. Some of the successful locations in previous years have included a botanical garden, zoo, 4-H center, college campus, and an elementary school.

Evaluations collected after each symposium have reflected that participants have most enjoyed the elementary school because this location had over 14 different outdoor teaching areas that were showcased by presenters during a variety of sessions. In other words, good weather prevailed, so the event was taken outdoors where participants could see an actual outdoor classroom in use! In the event of

inclement weather the symposium would have moved to the indoor classrooms set aside in the school. The Council was also fortunate in that the students had the day off for a teacher workday, which meant we didn't have to work around their schedule or space requirements.

- √ Once a location is determined than the date must be set. The one-day symposium has been scheduled on a variety of days throughout the week, but again evaluations have reflected that Fridays are the preferred day by the majority of past participants. Several years ago the event was also expanded to include a pre- and a post-workshop option for those desiring professional credit or a more in-depth look at a specific topic. For the past four years the Thursday evening 4-hour workshop has included curriculum that has a hands-on, interactive component that makes a great addition teaching in the outdoor learning environment. Saturday all-day workshops have provided participants countless ways to motivate their students in an outdoor learning environment. Through the workshops they have come to the realization that educational landscapes offer wonderful opportunities for curriculum-related activities with a broad palette of opportunities for enriching their teaching.
- √ As with most conferences an exhibit area provides additional resources, ideas, and networking opportunities that the teachers might not otherwise have known existed. Exhibits have included not only statewide and regional environmental non-profits, county and state governments, but also private industry and businesses, such as landscaping supply companies and book retailers, who specifically sold fieldguides, how-to books, and curriculum.

However, after noticing several years ago that participants were not engaging in the exhibits other than for the free resources, the Council decided to create an "Exhibitor Scavenger Hunt." Each exhibitor is asked to submit one question that can be answered by visiting and reading their exhibit. By doing this participants would be able to learn more about the educational resources available to them. Also, as an incentive to complete the scavenger hunt each participant would receive a resource for their outdoor classroom once they turned in their completed form. Past giveaways have included a bluebird house, a book on creating wildlife habitat, and curriculum.

- √ The Council is extremely aware of the toll state budgetary cuts have taken on professional training for educators. Therefore, in an effort to attract more participants, despite schools feeling the financial pinch, the committee decided to keep the registration fee to a minimum of \$50 per participant. The fee covers the one-day symposium, breakfast, lunch, and snacks, and a totebag full of resources. Additional fees are charged for the Thursday evening and Saturday workshops, which includes professional credit if they also attend the symposium. Grants have also allowed the Council to bring in special opening speakers and national workshop presenters. Through our efforts to include as many teachers as possible, the budget for the symposium reflects a "break-even event." However, in-kind donations or

discounts allow for a small profit to be made that further assist environmental education in Georgia.

Other tasks have arisen in an effort to further help keep costs down for the participants. The Council brainstormed creative ideas on how to raise additional funds, which led to a silent auction being held. And last year a habitat flea market was organized where participants and Council members were asked to bring in educational resources or items they no longer needed, but could still be used in a classroom. This creative solution for one person's junk being another person's treasure was extremely successful and will be repeated again at future symposia.

- √ As part of its public relations campaign, the Outdoor Classroom Council has also worked with the governor's office for the past four years to have the day proclaimed "Outdoor Classroom Education Day in Georgia." It is very important that all Georgians be made aware of how important these outdoor learning centers are to education and the future of the environment. The proclamation also adds more legitimacy to the event, which validates what the Council is hoping to accomplish with school superintendents, principals, and program directors.

- √ Long after the symposia are over the Council has ensured there is continued support and resources available to anyone interested in outdoor classrooms through the EEA website (www.eealliance.org), which has a list of additional resources and outdoor classroom grants. Also, upon the advice of previous evaluations, which stated, "There are too many good session choices being offered at the same time that I feel like I am missing some great information," the Council decided to put together a resource guide, which included activities and handouts from all the presenters, so that participants would receive the benefits of sessions they were unable to attend. This guide can also be found on the EEA website.

The Outdoor Classroom Council feels so strongly about the benefits of outdoor learning that an annual "Outdoor Classroom Service Award" was created several years ago to acknowledge the hard work of one school or individual who has really made a difference through the creation or use of an outdoor classroom. Nominations are accepted from throughout the state, with the difficult decision being made by the OCC awards committee, so that the award can be presented at the annual Environmental Education Alliance's conference. The award not only becomes a great way to promote the tremendous work being done throughout the state, but also becomes a great tool to help further promote the outdoor classroom movement, as administrators enjoy awards.

Georgia's success with being a leader in outdoor education has not been by accident, but is the direct result of the combined efforts of many dedicated individuals, organizations, and of course the Outdoor Classroom Council. Without everyone working together as a team, many educators would not have understood the value of transforming their schoolyards into outdoor learning areas, where their students could then reap the numerous educational benefits. The Outdoor Classroom Symposium through the years

has provided the spark that many teachers needed to incorporate different learning strategies into their curriculum, which in turn has fueled the outdoor classroom movement throughout the state.

The more educators that can be exposed to the benefits of outdoor classroom by attending the annual symposium, the more they will understand the important role these areas can play in preparing their students to be productive citizens. OCC wants participants to understand that students have an opportunity to develop a sense of belonging and ownership in their schoolyards and ultimately in their communities. The Council also wants participants to understand that these areas provide numerous real-world learning opportunities that make education relevant.

Creating places of educational value that will foster creative play, inspire a sense of wonder, and encourage good citizenship is a no-risk investment in our future. Therefore, we hope you join the movement and rise to meet this challenge by creating your own statewide outdoor classroom symposiums to bridge the gap for teachers unsure how to proceed on their own and to help them focus on developing skills and knowledge, while providing guidance on how to integrate what they have learned it into their outdoor learning areas.

Like the ripples created after the initial splash of a pebble dropped into a pond, we hope your participants will be encouraged to share these lessons again and again with their students, creating their own ripples that will lead to positive changes in their students' attitudes and behaviors.

Sidebar

A fourth grade teacher sent a thank you letter after attending an Outdoor Classroom Symposium several years ago. Here is an excerpt.

“...In the middle of my math lesson on measurements, I noticed more than one set of eyes focused on the birdfeeders just outside the classroom window. One of my students asked why our class couldn't go outside like the other classes. One of the other classes was in fact surrounding the birdfeeders measuring them with excitement and enthusiasm and working in teams. Information gathered was being documented in the students' journals. I learned later that these students shared their measurements and birdfeeder statistics with their overseas pen pals. It gave me a critical moment to compare student interest and participation in a similar lesson and my class was obviously not motivated.

However, I wondered how the other teacher could feel so comfortable teaching outdoors. I saw the outdoors as a buggy, hot, place where students could disappear, snakes could drop from trees, and poison ivy was just waiting to snag an unsuspecting ankle. That is before I attended the symposium and learned that teaching outdoor can actually be fun and exciting for not only my students, but for myself. I attended a wonderful session on outdoor teaching strategies, another on overcoming hazards outdoors, and one on honeybees.

Since returning to my school I have taken my students outdoors several times without incident and have taught almost every subject effectively using nature as my catalysts. I have also noticed an increased excitement for learning with each discovery we have made together. I know that my students are naturally interested in their environment and I love involving them in real world learning, which is meaningful to them.

Thank you for helping me feel more confident. I can't believe the years I wasted by staying indoors. The symposium has been an inspiration!...”

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