The Healthy Kids Collaborative
The Down East Partnership for Children

OUTDOOR LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS:

A TOOLKIT *for educators*

healthy places NC

AN INITIATIVE OF THE
KATE B. REYNOLDS CHARITABLE TRUST

What is an OLE, and why should you want one?

An outdoor learning environment (OLE) is an intentionally designed or designated outside setting used for exploration, inquiry, and learning, that fosters education across disciplines.

OLEs are versatile spaces that can serve as classrooms during the school day, active play areas during breaks, and community green spaces year-round.

Any outdoor space can be transformed into an outdoor learning environment.

⟶ But how?

The first step is understanding the purpose, benefits and appeal of an OLE. *What makes it different from the outdoor space you already have? Why change anything?*

OLEs are set up for use as outdoor classrooms and to promote kids' active play. Their strategic but simple design maximizes use, while traditional outdoor spaces tend to be overlooked and underused.

In this toolkit we'll provide you with the research summaries and success stories that make the case for OLEs (pages 10-12)**.**

The reason you as an educator want an OLE is they increase student performance, improve student behavior and engagement, and help teachers make lessons really stick.

The reason you as a community member want an OLE is they promote environmental stewardship and can improve community health. By encouraging community members to be outside, OLEs not only bring people together and inspire physical activity, but can include vegetable gardens that expand the community's access to fresh foods.

Step 1

Identifying your support team

It is possible to construct an OLE without funding sources or landscaping experience, but it is not possible to do without a committed support team. Many outdoor learning environments and outdoor classroom projects become inactive due to staff turnover or lack of community interest/support.[1] So before planning and initiating an OLE at your school or in your community, identify your project team. Your team can simply be 3-4 people committed to the mission and vision of OLEs: the important thing is that together you're committed to seeing the project through and promoting its use after construction.

The core support team for the OLE is tasked with promoting the OLE in the school/community even before its construction, in an effort to get as many community members on board and excited about it as possible. [If a core team member needs to relocate, he/she will appoint a replacement from the community before leaving.] The core support team may regularly call on small groups of volunteers to carry out OLE-related projects, so promoting community interest in the OLE early-on is crucial.

Step 2 Making plans

Once your core team is assembled, it's time to identify your space. What natural area do you intend to transform into an outdoor learning environment?

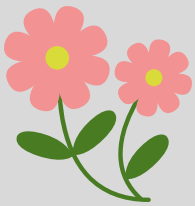
The planning phase will look different for each outdoor learning environment. Depending on the natural area you select, it may be as simple as scheduling volunteers to help rake leaves and paint signs, or as extensive as consulting with a landscape architect and native plant specialist. Components of OLE design, including what you can do for free and on varying budgets are covered on (page 6-7)**.**

This step is second chronologically and in importance to identifying your core support team for the OLE, but it's a close second. The third and final phase of OLE construction will depend on the natural area you've chosen to work with – its size, location, and planned components of it, as determined in this phase.

Step 3 Establishment & Maintenance

This is where the real fun starts and the OLE of your dreams puts down roots. The logistics of constructing your OLE will be specific to the plans you made earlier. Notes on common components of OLE design and budget tips for constructing it are on page 6-7.

Maintenance, however, is the unsung hero of successful OLEs. With your core team, identify the maintenance required by each new component of the OLE and how often it needs to be done. Then, plan whose job it will be. Volunteers, teachers, community members, students: appointed by whom, and on what schedule?



-Paths: How often do they need to be cleared? Raked?
-Gardens: How often do they need to be watered? Weeded? Harvested?
-Plants, trees, shrubs: Anything that needs to be pruned – how often?

Maintenance tasks, especially for gardens, easily work into lesson plans. Having students responsible for the care and keeping of the OLE is wonderful, but remember to plan for when school is out of session too.

Components of OLE Design

Working with what you have

The OLE starts as a natural setting to which you already have access, like part of the school grounds, and may include fixtures (equipment, existing trees) that can be used or built on to fulfill OLE purposes. No two OLEs look the same, but these guidelines and examples can help your OLE team brainstorm.

Optional

- **Benches or tree-stumps** to be used as seats for outdoor classes (local tree services may donate cut stumps/disks from trees removed from residential areas if requested; individuals with recently cut trees in their yard often offer it to anyone willing to take it away)
- **Raised beds/boxes** for small gardens if the natural soil is rocky or clay-filled (home improvement and garden stores are also likely to donate materials if a request is made and the OLE purpose is explained)

Recommended Components of an OLE

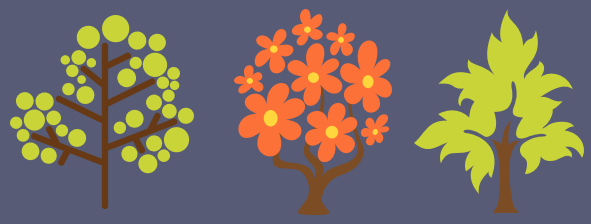
- **Signs:** labeling the components of your OLE (and the OLE itself!) is helpful for visitors and for the appearance of a "finished product"
- **Shade:** a shelter, structure, or naturally shady spot to protect learners from harsh sun
- **Paths:** usually around the perimeter of the OLE, if large enough – paths should help direct visitors and learners through the OLE (around the perimeter, looping through raised-bed gardens, branching off to work/play areas), and can be marked by simple landscaping + deliberate foot-traffic during construction, or by large, flat stones or poured concrete
- **Flat, clear area** to be used as a classroom (grass kept short, or dirt area cleared of rocks and sticks)

Relying on volunteers whose interest the OLE support team piqued in Step 1 is key to keeping costs down, as basic OLE construction involves more manpower than materials.

Outdoor Learning Environment

Design Ideas by Resource Level

If you're a teacher whose students will use the OLE when it's constructed, ask your students what they think should go in it and how they think it should be set up. Kids are extremely creative, and involving them in the planning/construction phases will encourage use of the OLE later on.



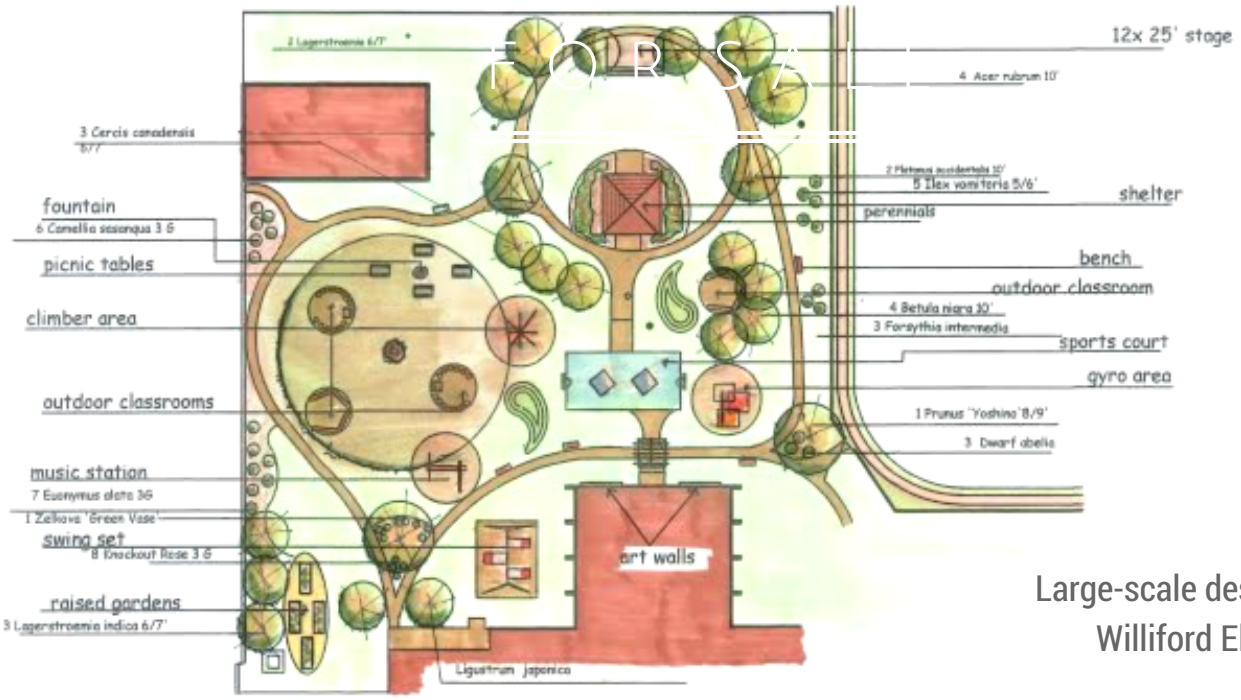
-If your operating budget is $0 and your support team is committed, your OLE will start with volunteers removing potential safety hazards from the selected natural area (rocks, large sticks, any trash), and making a sign to label your space [Name/School Name]'s Outdoor Learning Environment. Hand-painted signs look great and add character.

Simply taking an indoor classroom lesson and having kids do it outside (worksheets, reading) once the space is safe and available confers many of the benefits of outdoor learning, even when the only change in the lesson is its setting.

Your team should call local garden shops and enthusiastically explain your OLE project (and your budget) and ask if they would be willing to donate any supplies. Many people are sympathetic to teachers' budgets, and, increasingly, to the need for teaching kids the importance of their natural environment.

-If you are in a school or community with even a modest budget for projects under which the OLE may qualify, consider which additions would boost utility of the OLE most. If you have $75-150, maybe your team decides to put in a raised bed for a class vegetable garden, and selects a hardy crop like kale or broccoli.

-If your team is working with a greater resource pool or is the recipient of an applicable grant, consider meeting with a landscape architect to make formal design plans during the planning phase. Professionals, especially with local expertise, may have recommendations for the layout of the OLE and plant types to use, and can advise your team with larger scale OLE implementation.



Large-scale design plan from Williford Elementary

THE PERFECT PLAN

Outdoor Learning Environments: Drafts, Designs, & Examples

Project Example from NLI

OLE draft from FSF Architects

Outdoor Amphitheater/Lecture Stage

Designs & Examples

Making the Case for OLEs: the Data

In a study of 7- to 12-year-olds with attention deficit disorder (ADD), children displayed less severe ADD symptoms after they spent time in "green" settings, and the greener the outdoor environment, with more grass and trees, the better the effect (Taylor, Kuo & Sullivan, 2001).

More recently, the Green School Yard project compiled a list of ten compelling reasons to promote OLEs (below).

- Shifts educational focus from secondary to primary sources. Traditional classroom teaching uses textbooks, lectures, video and the internet as instructional tools. The Outdoor Classroom exposes students through direct experience to nature areas and demonstration models such as weather stations, water flow systems and renewable energy installations.
- Uses experiential teaching methodologies to engage students. The Outdoor Classroom fosters active, hands-on, inquiry-based learning in a real world setting. Through group problem-solving activities students embrace the learning process as well as seeking final outcomes.
- Makes learning a multi-sensory experience. By engaging the senses of touch, smell, hearing, taste and seeing, students retain an intimate physical memory of activities that are long lasting and synergistic. E. O. Wilson's Biophilia Hypothesis reminds us that the human species, having evolved in the natural world, has a deeply-rooted need to associate and connect with nature.
- Fosters the use of systems thinking. As a mini-ecosystem, the Outdoor Classroom emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things. Through exposure to the intricate web of life, students come to understand that complex natural and societal systems often require holistic rather than linear solutions.

- Lends itself to inter-disciplinary studies. In seeking a holistic understanding of the outdoor classroom it is often necessary, and desirable, to employ multiple academic disciplines. Laying out a planting bed requires math skills. Distinguishing native from non-native plants provides an opportunity for social studies. Creating a scarecrow is an art project. A garden journal will foster writing and drawing skills.
- Recognizes and celebrates differing learning styles. As popularized in Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, people have a variety of aptitudes and ways of learning. Although some students thrive in a text-based environment, others will benefit from a more experiential approach. For example, ESL students, SPED students, and students where reading is not prioritized at home – those that comprise the so-called Achievement Gap – may contribute more in the Outdoor Classroom.
- Connects the school to the neighborhood and the world-at-large. Through learning and stewardship activities students come to understand that their schoolyard microcosm reflects global environmental issues. Proximity to the surrounding neighborhood often leads to service learning projects that emphasize social involvement and responsibility. Accessibility to the Outdoor Classroom provides opportunities for out-of-school time programming. High visibility and interest encourages local volunteerism.
- Design and installation is a modest capital expense. School systems often struggle with budgetary issues in prioritizing initiatives. The cost/benefit ratio for installing and sustaining an Outdoor Classroom is attractive and the goal of an Outdoor Classroom in every schoolyard is achievable.
- Projects a positive message about public education. Schoolyards can be degraded and unsafe or vibrant, dynamic school/community open spaces. Either way, we send a message to students and neighborhood about how much we value the education of our children. The Outdoor Classroom is a reminder that innovation is alive and well in public education.

- Blurs the boundaries between academic learning and creative play. Kids love the Outdoor Classroom. When a teacher asks who wants to go outside every hand is raised. Absenteeism goes down on Outdoor Classroom days. By preserving a child's innate sense of curiosity and wonder we will foster active and engaged life-long learners. Yes, learning can be FUN!

from https://greenschoolyardnetwork.org/

Local teachers have been pleasantly surprised by outdoor settings' impact on their students, too . . .

"THE DAYS I TOOK MY STUDENTS OUTSIDE I GOT SO MUCH MORE WORK OUT OF THEM THAN I WOULD HAVE IN THE CLASSROOM."

-Tarsha Darden

5th Grade Teacher, Carver Elementary

Outdoor learning environments foster active, hands-on, inquiry-based learning in a real world setting. Through group problem-solving activities students embrace the learning *process* along with its outcomes.