



RESOURCES

TITLE | BUILDING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE AND INCLUSIVE OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS

CATEGORY | Program

SUB-CATEGORY | Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

OVERVIEW | This resource is a guide to help educators build inclusive and culturally responsive outdoor classrooms. This resource was created by Education Outside to support garden educators as they enter new school communities, work to form successful relationships within the school community, and build a safe space for all students in the outdoor classroom.

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School gardens are spaces meant for all to enjoy, but in order for all students to feel welcome, safe, and included, efforts need to be taken to ensure that an outdoor classroom is culturally responsive and inclusive. By taking the time to get to know your school community and understand their needs, you will better be able to create a space where students can be themselves and build authentic relationships with their teachers, peers, and the natural world. Below you will find a list of actions or resources to consider while working to build inclusive and culturally responsive spaces. This list is not exhaustive, as opportunities will vary between schools, but is meant to guide and inspire educators toward finding possibilities within their own communities.

This list includes tips for building community and relationships, making lessons inclusive, and developing appropriate outdoor classroom infrastructure; these are a reflection of Education Outside’s three programmatic pillars: Leadership for Community Engagement, Learning and Teaching Outdoors, and Outdoor Classroom Design. Ultimately, it is important to use a multi-faceted approach to build culturally responsive and inclusive outdoor classrooms.

Building Inclusive Spaces

Leadership for Community Engagement

Building relationships within your school community is the first step to building an inclusive school garden. Below you will find examples of recommended approaches to outreach that are first steps in the relationship-building process.

Bulletin Board

Communicate with your school staff about where you can create and maintain an outdoor classroom-specific bulletin board that you update regularly throughout the school year. Ideally, this is in an area where there is both parent and student foot traffic and not tucked away out of sight. This board can be used throughout the year to showcase different aspects of your program. You should use the board in your first week on site to introduce yourself; include a photo, details about you and what you enjoy, a sign-up sheet for families that want to get involved in the garden, and what you are excited to teach in the garden this year. Both parents and children will be reading the board, so consider what they might find most interesting.



As the year goes on, shift the focus of the bulletin board to be more student-centered by displaying their garden classwork, relating their garden experiences to other school or home experiences, and introducing them to new topics. Consider your entire school population and offer an accurate and inclusive representation of the community, their values, and their experiences. Some ideas for your bulletin board:

- Use languages spoken in the school community, as well as pictures and textures, on your bulletin board throughout the year
- Connect the outdoor classroom to heritage months (such as featuring African American scientists during Black History Month)
- Post or request culturally relevant garden recipes using seasonal crops as prompts
- Decorate for significant cultural observances (such as marigolds for Dia de los Muertos)
- Advertise relevant local events or resources
- Post fun science facts or traditional uses for garden plants

After School Program

Many schools often have after-school programs on site that serve to provide additional care or educational options for students after the school day is done. If your school has an after-school program, it can be a great opportunity to either partner your programs or extend an invitation for them to utilize the outdoor classroom in their own way (be sure to agree upon garden expectations). Students who may be less interactive during school-day lessons in the garden may be able to develop a different or deeper relationship with the outdoor classroom in the less formal structure of an after-school program. Often, after-school coordinators and teachers have developed deep relationships with the students they serve, so connecting that relationship to the outdoor classroom will likely increase student participation, commitment, and success during their formal class time. Additionally, the increased use of the garden during a different time of day may lead to increased involvement in garden programs by the community being served if they are unable to participate during regular school hours.

Wellness Center/Student Support

Similarly to partnering with your after-school program, working with the daytime student support team can be extremely beneficial as you work to learn the needs of your school community. This team may be called something like the Wellness Team, Resource Room, Care Center, or Student Services. If you aren't sure if your school has this, ask your principal. Once you have identified this team, introduce yourself and start by asking questions about how they work to support your school. Consider how you can incorporate existing systems of student support in the outdoor classroom. If specific students have support plans in place, see if you can support those needs in the outdoor classroom; such as preparing extra visuals, including vocabulary words in native languages, or having additional behavior management tools for individual students.

For more school community engagement strategies, see the Leadership for Community Engagement training resources listed in the Table of Contents.

Learning and Teaching Outdoors

As a garden educator, you can determine what and how you teach your students in the outdoor classroom. By considering them first and designing lessons that are intentionally relevant to their experience, you can foster an inclusive and meaningful learning environment for them.

Plan Relevant Lessons

Once you have started forming successful relationships across school teams and have started to learn about the community values, you can begin to cater lesson plans and garden events to meet the needs of your community. Talk to students, parents, and school staff to get an idea of what has been successful in the past. Do your own research about the history of your community and how you can bring relevant information into your lessons and special events. For example, look into the history of habitation in your area (such as the original Indigenous occupants, the migration patterns, or the historical industries) and design outdoor lessons, activities, or events that reflect and honor those pasts.

Routines

Establishing clear routines for how to engage with the outdoor classroom is a great way to help kids feel safe and included in a new space. With clear guidelines and expectation setting, students can quickly connect to the garden as a place of their own, which helps them self regulate and relate to the space before delving into academic content. These routines can be utilized during classes or during informal garden time (e.g. during recess or after school programs). Be sure to provide ample opportunities for students to both learn and practice routines. Some examples of inclusive routines:

- Welcome all students with the same greeting as they enter the outdoor classroom, or switch it up based on commonly spoken languages.
- Have students do a “temperature/weather check” using hand motions (thumbs up/middle/down, hot/warm/cold or sun/clouds/rain/storm movements) that represent their mood (will require practice and a visual).
- Use mindful breathing, smelling leaves, or quiet sit spots before starting class to focus and calm students.

See the *Best Practices for Building Classroom Culture* in the Table of Contents for more ideas.

Outdoor Classroom Design

Outdoor classrooms should be designed with all students in mind, for students already confident in nature as well as those who are less comfortable outdoors. The design should also consider students’ physical, emotional, and behavioral needs. Below you will find a few examples of ways to make your outdoor classroom feel safe and inclusive for a variety of student experiences.

Sensory Garden

Inviting students and families to engage in the garden using their senses is a great way to break down barriers amongst a community with diverse backgrounds, languages, and experiences. By taking the time to select plants with a variety of smells, textures, tastes, and even sounds, you invite curiosity and interest for anyone passing by, regardless of their experience in a garden. To make sure people know how to interact with the space, add signs with the appropriate body parts to specific areas; such as a nose for a fragrant area, or an ear for plants that make interesting noises in the wind (see *The Top 10: Extended Picture Guide*, linked in the Table of Conte for more sign inspiration). Sensory gardens provide additional opportunities to engage with a garden beyond beauty or utility, as it invites you to make observations in a variety of ways, and can be especially valuable for students with sensory processing issues or who need extra support with self-regulation.

Peace Corner

The peace corner is a physical place in the outdoor classroom that supports feelings of peace, calmness, and relaxation. It can be in a corner, but can also be anywhere else that has a defined boundary. Make the area feel tranquil with plants, seating options, calm words/images painted on surfaces, and anything else that might add to that feeling. Choose plants with relaxing smells or textures to encourage calmness. Allow students to visit that space when they need a peaceful moment to themselves or with a small group. Students may need to practice knowing when and how to utilize the peace corner so be sure to model using the space yourself and offer praise to students appropriately when they use the peace corner appropriately.

Calm Down Kit

A calm down kit can be a useful tool that teaches kids how to cope with difficult-to-manage emotions. The kit contains items to support students mentally and physically regulating themselves, such as a coloring book, a stress ball, bubbles, play dough, small fidgets, and more. To make the kit more fitting to an outdoor classroom, you could include buckets that students use to move soil or water around or a bowl of colorful seeds that they can move their hands through. The kit is not designed as a punishment. In order to promote students utilizing this tool on their own, model using the kit yourself.

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When you get frustrated about something (pests eating your plants, not enough sun/rain, noticing unsafe behavior in the garden) tell the students you'd like to take a moment to calm down and then show them what it looks like using the kit. It's also okay to gently suggest to a student that using the kit may feel like a nice break from whatever they're doing. Partnering with your students to come up with a name for their kit is another great idea so that they feel connected to their new tool. If your garden has a peace corner, this is a great place to keep the kit out and accessible at all times.

For more infrastructure ideas, see *Building Your Outdoor Classroom: The Top 10* resource listed in the Table of Contents.