

Tips and Tricks for Outdoor Classroom Management

from Boston Public School teachers experienced in using the schoolyard as a resource for teaching

Develop & Practice Outdoor Classroom Routines

Develop Outdoor Classroom rules with your students to post in the classroom. (No running. Quiet voices. Touch gently.)

Establish set procedures for going outdoors

Practice collecting clipboards and other tools, lining up, and walking through the halls so students know what is expected and can get ready quickly and quietly.

Use a different door than students use at recess

Using a different door can reinforce the fact that this is class time and help students remember to exhibit the behavior of scientists, writers, artists or researchers.

Have an outdoor “gathering spot”

Designate a gathering area where students go when they first get outside to await initial instructions, and to which they return for a mid-lesson check-in, or closing discussion.

Consider having a signal for emergency situations

Practice it so students know how to return to the building immediately, if needed.

Review and practice routines periodically.

Invite students to reflect on how the class did after the first few times out. What went well? What needs improvement? Practice routines as needed throughout the year.



Be Prepared

Have a clear objective for going outdoors

Be clear about the purpose of going outdoors for each lesson. Direct students’ attention to the specific things you want them to focus on this time out, and help them connect what they see and do outdoors to what they have been learning in the classroom.

Have a backup lesson plan

The first several times out students will be learning *how* to work outdoors and the work they are doing may be secondary. Have an alternative lesson planned in case students haven’t yet mastered the outdoor classroom rules and you have to go back in.

Anticipate the weather

Going outdoors is useful in all types of weather though you will likely spend less time outdoors if it is cold or rainy. “Tell students you will be going out the day before and ask them to bring appropriate clothing. As they become used to working outdoors they are increasingly motivated to come prepared.

Have materials on hand

Have clipboards, hand lenses, field guides or other books, extra pencils, ready in a crate or backpack so you can easily take them with you when you go out.

Build Success

Help students get to know their schoolyard

Use the first few times out to help students explore their schoolyard. Walk around the site and *talk* with them about what you find. What questions do they have? What can they, or can't they, name? Use these trips to build a common vocabulary. Map the schoolyard and come up with place names: the "Big Rock"; "the forest". Point out any noxious plants (poison ivy, stinging nettle) that they will need to be able to identify. Let students poke around, freely explore and play with the "outdoor materials" before getting down to work.

Keep it short

Begin with short trips out and increase the time spent outside as students' skills and stamina increase. An outdoor experience may be only ten to twenty minutes. It may be just long enough to make notes or record data in notebooks; later in the year your time outdoors may be longer.

Always give students something to carry

Clipboards (extra pencils!), notebooks, measuring instruments, or other tools help students take their task seriously.

Go out often

The more you go out, the easier it gets. Students' ability to work purposefully outdoors increases as they learn what to expect, experience the comfort of a routine, and develop confidence in their own outdoor observation skills.

Model outdoor skills

Model what you want students to do before setting them loose to work.

Show them how to turn over a stone gently and replace it; how to examine a plant; how to sit quietly and write; how to observe without being heard. They will learn a lot about how to look closely and take notes by watching you do it alongside them.

Remember that learning looks different outdoors

Voices may be louder, and body movements larger outdoors. Excitement is likely to be high, and expressed more physically than in the classroom. Students may move around to share what they found with others. *Encourage* them to talk to each other about what they find.

Believe in your students

All students from the highest achieving to the most challenged can work outdoors. Resist the temptation to use outdoor work as a reward for good behavior. Communicate a belief that working outdoors is simply part of everyday class work. Your students may well surprise you.

