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## The Great Escape: Taking (and Keeping!) Learning Outdoors

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“There’s no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes.” This traditional Scandinavian saying is rooted in opportunity. Inclement weather is not a time to hibernate, despite how it has been branded in Northern climates. As we struggle with the pandemic forcing us to social distance and learn at home, we need look no further than our own backyards for relief.

The connection between human beings and our natural world is innate, unbreakable even, and brings our children many opportunities for wellness, beyond learning opportunities. Kids who spend time in nature are more physically active; they are exposed to valuable sunlight containing vitamin D, and fresh air — all leading to enhanced blood circulation and mood! Spending time outside allows kids to tire themselves through activity and exertion contributing to better sleeping patterns. Beyond the physical, nature brings social and emotional benefits through the release of stress and the simple joy that play provides.

In our experience, there are a set of roadblocks that challenge administrators and educators to incorporate outdoor learning opportunities in temperate climates. Whether the goal is coordinated group learning or individual wellness practices — permission, preparation, adjacency, and access prove to be real roadblocks. By addressing these roadblocks, a school can better instill a culture that values the outdoors as a fundamental part of learning and wellness.

One of the largest roadblocks to outdoor learning in temperate climates is the fear that inclement weather instills in us. Winter has been cast as a time to hibernate, wet weather a time to seek shelter, and the fear of illness as a result of extended exposure to the elements is ingrained in us. In reality, exposure to cold temperatures boasts all kinds of health benefits – physical and mental. As a society, we need to give ourselves permission to seek all of the benefits from time spent outdoors.

In schools today, a student’s day is based on regimented structure: time-limited, subject-specific class periods, and (for young children) regulated recess time. Finding balance between the traditional academic structure of the day and outdoor learning is another roadblock we see our clients’ facing. It is all a matter of disruption and security. To put on proper attire and traverse to the great outdoors could take up the majority of a precious class period.

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Passing-time for older students is often not long enough to factor in even a few breaths of fresh air throughout the day.

As the days grow shorter and the weather a bit colder, how do we maintain the benefits of outdoor learning throughout all seasons of the school year? Intentional design, creative planning, a sustainable mindset, and curriculum as a driver all support learning and wellness practices that can happen outside, despite some of our most challenging weather conditions.

As we navigate back to a more traditional regiment of in-person instruction and embark on the design era of the post-Covid educational facility...what strategies should be leveraged to establish a more integrated approach to outdoor learning? As greater investments are proposed in outdoor physical infrastructure and curricular approach, we believe the following concepts can not only lure instruction outdoors, but can also drive utilization of these open air experiences no matter the rigor of the conditions:

1. Increase access and connectivity through intentionality
2. Create destinations that celebrate sustainability
3. Align curriculum, content, and culture
4. Cultivate community engagement through partnerships



### **Walled Lake Consolidated Schools – Early Childhood Center**

Drawing inspiration from its spectacular site, which boasts of contours, woodlands, and wetlands, this new early childhood center was intentionally designed to create a natural connection to nature and experiential learning. All classrooms were designed with large windows to maximize natural light and low window seats for these young learners to create

a visual connection to nature. Direct access to a fenced in green space directly outside the classrooms not only reduces transition time for teachers, but helps create a more personalized outdoor learning experience for the students. Additionally, to increase access and connectivity, an integrated supply of water and Wi-Fi supports opportunities for collaboration.

### **Walled Lake Consolidated Schools – Dublin Elementary School**

The new Dublin Elementary was designed around the concept of nature and play and its importance in a child's early developmental years. The design goals included fostering a sense of community, establishing a presence, and designing spaces to support a variety of learning modalities. The addition of an art patio and an outdoor classroom allow for a variety of outdoor activities for the students year round. The outdoor classroom was sized appropriately to support a full class of students and includes built in bench seating with access to outdoor writing surfaces, providing flexibility for teaching with enough space for hands-on learning activities.



### **Port Huron Area School District – Port Huron Northern High School**

As the District looked to implement a new STEM curriculum at Port Huron Northern High School, the goal was to create an environment that supports collaboration and curiosity. The new Engineering/Biomedical STEAM labs were designed to support various areas of study like robotics, biomedical engineering, 2D/3D art and were strategically located adjacent to the new art studios. The STEM

labs and art studios have direct access to a shared outdoor patio, which works as an extension of the learning space, while providing visibility for supervision. The patio creates a culture that supports boundary less collaboration and the appropriate space for students to experiment in the elements.

### Perrysburg Schools – Hull Prairie Intermediate School

At Hull Prairie, students follow a learning trail of thoughtfully developed site signage purposefully written to reflect relevant science curriculum and units of study. The text on these monumental signs was tailored to the anticipated reading level and skill of the typical Intermediate aged student. They lead to a permanent indigenous prairie, planted in guidance with the Toledo Zoo. Not only did these partners lend their shovels, but staff also support educators each season with structured activities connecting not only content, but also neighboring school communities...affording urban, suburban and rural cross pollination of outdoor exploration.



If there is one thing we can all learn from the challenges that Covid-19 has brought forth for education, it is that designing resilience into our school campuses is paramount and can be achieved by placing emphasis equally on indoor and outdoor learning opportunities for students of all age groups. Designing intentional variety into educational environments can give schools the flexibility to adapt with changing dynamics in the future...whether adversity be a result of changing seasons or even the next pesky pandemic.



As you look for ways to increase opportunities for outdoor learning and drive utilization of its benefits through the inclement months...don't forget that solutions are already all around us! And if you need a little extra comfort, don't forget a warming drink or that "coming in from the cold" ritual to bring extra joy!

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