



Ditch the Desks: Action Plan for Taking the Classroom Outside

By Ashley Schopieray

INTRODUCTION

If you had the choice to spend the day outside or go to school which would you choose? Spending time outdoors might be more fun, but school is important as well. Fortunately, you no longer have to make a choice! By taking the classroom outside and using local resources to teach and learn students can have the best of both worlds!

According to Richard Louv, author of “Last Child in the Woods,” students in the United States are suffering from “Nature Deficit Disorder.” This disorder stems from the long hours students spend in the classroom and home, which limits their exposure and experience with nature. Traditionally, sitting behind a desk was thought to be the most efficient way to learn, but new research is showing that spending time outdoors improves student behavior, attendance, and attitudes!ⁱ

Nature Deficit Disorder can lead to problems such as obesity, inattentiveness, and low academic performance.ⁱⁱ Being outdoors reduces student stress and fosters a deeper connection with the environment that is missing in the classroom. It also takes students away from the fatigue of sitting in a classroom and allows an alternative way for students to learn. This is especially important for students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, as studies have found spending time outdoors improves their ability to concentrate in school.ⁱⁱⁱ

Reasons to Take the Classroom Outside:

Benefits for the Environment:

- Lessons that add gardens and landscaping to schools improve local biodiversity and restores native ecosystems.
- Spending time outside improves students’ appreciation for the environment, making them more likely to be environmental leaders later in life.^{iv}
- Outdoor classrooms teach students environmental stewardship and inspire environmentally friendly choices.

Benefits for Your School:

- In a study done by a consortium of 16 State Education Departments across the U.S., schools with “hands-on environmental curriculums” saw 100% improvement in student behavior, attendance, and attitudes.ⁱ
- In the same study, 77% of the schools saw improvement on standardized tests.ⁱ
- Working outside gives alternative options for students to learn.
- Outdoor classrooms and the lessons taught in them fall under United States Education Standards.^v

Benefits for Your Health:

- Improves your capability to learn and concentrate.
- Prevents health and development problems, including social problems.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Encourages physical fitness and being active.

HOW TO START YOUR CAMPAIGN

Have a Clear, Written Goal

Goals will provide direction and focus to your group. They will keep you and everyone you work with on track, while providing a way to measure how successful you have been. Choose one from the suggestions below, or write your own.

- **Convince an administrator and/or teacher to support outdoor classrooms.** Items such as greenhouses, gardens, rain barrels/gardens, new landscaping, etc. will likely require the approval of an administrator to be installed. Without their support, it will be impossible to make outdoor classrooms a reality. Administrators/teachers will also have the resources to help you raise money for the project and convince others to join. Also try your school's PTSA, you'd be amazed by the things you can accomplish if you have them on your side.
- **Recruit ___ number of students to join your campaign.** The more students you can get to support your cause the greater voice you will have. Start a club dedicated to your campaign and meet once a week. Explain to others why the issue is important and why they should care. Once they join, have them bring a friend!
- **Get teachers to take their classrooms outside at least once a week (if not more!).** If teachers do not support taking their students outside then it will never happen. Give teachers the facts on why spending time outdoors is beneficial, both for their students and for themselves!
- **Fundraise ___ % of the money needed for outdoor materials.** There is often very little swing room in school's budgets, so a majority of the money for outdoor classrooms will have to come from fundraised money. However, large amounts of funds are not necessary and this can be easily accomplished. Try environmentally friendly fundraising such as selling reusable items, or ask local businesses for help.

Key Messages

You need key messages for your campaign – these will clearly state the problem and a solution to everyone you talk to. Choose two to five that will be understandable to your peers and administrators. Be sure that everyone working on your campaign understands the key messages and is prepared to repeat them. Here are a few suggestions:

- “Outdoor classrooms are beneficial to student learning and health.”
- “Lessons learned in the classroom can also be taught outdoors.”
- “Outdoor classrooms will add hands on experience and real life examples to lessons.”

Strategy and Action Items

The strategy is how you will get from “point A” to “point green.” Without a strategy your efforts will lack significance, so planning out your campaign is important from the get go. Depending on the goal, the best route might be anything from a grassroots petition, multi-media outreach, or education. We've provided a sample below, follow along or plan your own:

SAMPLE SHORT TERM STRATEGY

Action Issue:	Taking Classrooms Outside	Grade Level:	9-12
Goal:	Improve students' attentiveness and enjoyment of school by encouraging teachers and administrators to create outdoor learning experiences		
Overall Strategy:	Convince teachers to take their classroom outside through organized outreach and petitioning.		
Total Campaign Length	4 weeks (three in planning and logistics)	Activism Experience Level (1-3):	1

WEEK	FOCUS	WEEKLY ACTION ITEMS	TIPS
1	<p>Educate Yourself</p> <p>Hone Your Leadership Skills</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research the issue. Inform yourself on why outdoor classrooms are a good idea and why they would work in your school. Find other schools that have been successful and see what they have done. Create a list of an outdoor classroom's benefits and choose the top three that apply to your school. These could be used in your key messages. • Recruit others that you think would be interested to join your campaign. These students can help you spread the word. Have a meeting where everyone can brainstorm their ideas and plan for the weeks ahead. • Create flyers with more information for teacher's and students. Use bright colors and big bold lettering to get your point across. Also create pledge cards for teachers to use. • Plan the strategy and dialogue you want to use for the next few weeks. What are the main points you want to get across to students and/or teachers? Why is this issue important to you, and why should it be important to others? Be prepared to answer questions by considering the arguments someone might have against outdoor classrooms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When researching, look for outdoor lesson plans that can be used by teachers. These will help support your case by giving examples of ways to learn outside. Check out Earth Day Network's outdoor lesson plans on our website at www.earthday.net/education. • Set up the key messages and goals of the campaign as a group so everyone is informed and on the same note • Check your school rules before passing out flyers, petitioning students, etc. You'll gain more respect if you're not breaking the rules to achieve your goals.
2	<p>Make your arguments!</p> <p>Gain Student Support!</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule times and places where you plan to gain student support. Try stopping in at club meetings, talking to tables at lunch, or working the crowd at an athletic event. Take your flyers with you so other students can read about what you are doing. Also try other media outlets such as spreading the word on online (i.e. Facebook) or speaking on your daily announcements. Delegate these meetings out to various members of your campaign. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing the WHY behind what you are doing is immensely important to receive a positive response from other students. • Don't forget to contact the PTSA! Have parents sign your petition and administrators may be

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convince students at these meetings that this issue deserves their attention. Have students that support you spread the word to their friends and other student groups you haven't covered. The more students that are interested, the more administrators and teachers will pay attention to the issue. • Collect letters of support from students that are in support for your campaign. Plan a goal for how many you want to achieve (10, 50, or 200?) Provide sample letters and statistics for students to gain inspiration from. Make weekly goals for how many letters of support you hope to gain. The more specific your goals the more likely they are to happen! 	<p>more willing to pay attention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication is key to a successful campaign. Have meetings that keep everyone updated on your progress. • Make sure letters are written to include facts and stats about the health and educational benefits of outdoor classrooms. You don't want this to seem like students just want to get a tan.
3	Get Teachers on Board!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule times with teachers where you can speak to them about the issue. Ask a teacher if they have time before or after class, and take a few classmates with you to show that this issue involves multiple students. Delegate these meetings out to various members of your campaign. • Convince teachers that you are serious about the issue and that they should be too. Show them the letters that you have collected, and ask if they are willing to pledge they will take students outside. Explain the research that you have done and give examples of lessons that can be taught outside for their subject. • Have Teachers Commit to taking their class outside at least once in the next month. Use the pledge cards you created in week one and have them display it somewhere in their classroom. Ask them to make their own goals for long term change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't be afraid to show passion and dedication to this campaign! Teachers will respond better if they know this is something that means a lot to you.
4	Go Outside! Evaluate Your Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check in with teachers to confirm that they will be taking their classes outside. Ask if someone can sit in and observe their class so they can record its success and student reactions. • Document the classes outside by taking pictures or video. Interview students and record their response- did they enjoy learning outside? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask teachers if there is anything you can do to help take their classroom outside • Display the pictures and results of the outdoor classroom somewhere that the rest of the school can enjoy them. This will also help raise awareness.
Beyond	Build Your Movement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take your research and results to the administration to show how successfully it was • Build on with the following 6-8 month campaign to plant a garden at your school! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You've got momentum! Take a break, and then move forward with your next plan while you still

			have everyone's attention!
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SAMPLE LONG TERM STRATEGY			
Action Issue:	Taking Classrooms Outside	Grade Level:	9-12
Goal:	Plant a garden on school grounds to be used as an outside classroom for learning and teaching.		
Overall Strategy:	Gain the support of teachers and administration, then work with other students to raise funds for your outdoor classroom. Plan a day long event to create the outdoor classroom and celebrate its completion.		
Total Campaign Length	6 Months	Activism Experience Level (1-3):	2

MONTH	FOCUS	MONTHLY ACTION ITEMS	TIPS
1	Educate Yourself Hone Your Leadership Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research the issue. Inform yourself on why outdoor classrooms are a good idea and why they would work in your school. Find other schools that have been successful and see what they have done. Create a list of an outdoor classroom's benefits and choose the top three that apply to your school. • Estimate the cost of an outdoor garden at your school. Come up with a few areas on school grounds where you think the garden could be planted. • Recruit others that you think would be interested to join your campaign. Start a club that will have regular meetings to discuss the campaign. It's great to get as many people involved as possible because remember, multiple brains are always better than just one! • Brainstorm the reasons that a garden would be beneficial to your school. What types of local plants can be planted? Could they be used in the cafeteria? Would they attract local wildlife? Ask yourself and other students what they want to achieve in this campaign and what changes they would like to see at their school. • Plan the strategy and dialogue you want 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When researching, look for outdoor lesson plans that can be used by teachers. These will help support your case by giving examples of ways to learn outside. • Set up the key messages and goals of the campaign as a group so everyone is informed and on the same note. • Check your school rules before passing out flyers, petitioning students, etc. You'll gain more respect if you're not breaking the rules to achieve your goals. • Keep everyone involved by allowing them to work on the areas that interest them the most

		<p>to use for the next few months. What are the main points you want to get across to students and/or teachers? Why is this issue important to you, and why should it be important to others? Be prepared to answer questions by considering the arguments someone might have against outdoor classrooms</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create flyers and posters with more information for teacher's and students. Use bright colors and big bold lettering to get your point across. Also create petitions for students to sign and pledge cards for teachers to use. 	
<p>2</p>	<p>Make your arguments!</p> <p>Gain Student and Teacher Support!</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target Classmates first to get their support. Arrange times and places where you plan to gain student support. Try stopping in at club meetings, talking to tables at lunch, or working the crowd at an athletic event. Take your flyers with you so other students can read about what you are doing. Also try other media outlets such as spreading the word on online through Facebook or speaking on your daily announcements. Delegate these meetings out to various members of your campaign. • Convince students at these meetings that this issue deserves their attention. Have students that support you spread the word to their friends and other student groups you haven't covered. The more students that are interested, the more administrators and teachers will pay attention to the issue. • Collect signatures of students that want a garden planted on school grounds. Plan a goal for how many you want to achieve (300, 500, or 2,000?) • Schedule times with teachers where you can speak to them about the issue. Ask a teacher if they have time before or after class, and take a few classmates with you to show that this issue involves multiple students. Delegate these meetings out to various members of your campaign. • Convince teachers that you are serious about the issue and that they should be too. Show them the signatures that you have collected, and ask if they are willing to sign. Explain the research that you have done and give examples of lessons that can be taught outside for their subject. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressing the WHY behind what you are doing is immensely important to receive a positive response from other students. • Don't forget to contact the PTSA! Have parents sign your petition and administrators may be more willing to pay attention • Communication is key to a successful campaign. Have meetings that keep everyone updated on your progress • Stay positive and polite when talking to students/teachers. Nobody wants to listen to someone who is giving them a hard time or being rude. • Don't be afraid to show passion and dedication to this campaign! Teachers will respond better if they know this is something that means a lot to you

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have Teachers Commit to taking their class outside at least once in the next month. Use the pledge cards you created in week one and have them display it somewhere in their classroom. See if they will help you speak with the administration and ask them to make their own goals for long term change. 	
3	Get the Administration on Board!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set-Up Appointments with your principal and other administrators in your school. • Prepare the argument you plan to make and practice in front of a mirror. Make visuals and see if a few other students would be willing to attend the meeting with you. • Persuade the administration during your meeting to allow a garden to be built on school grounds. Provide all of the facts and benefits you learned in your research during Month 1 and the long list of signatures on the petitions. • Ask to meet with the school board if planting a garden requires their approval, and ask your principal to support you in your movement. • Receive Permission to plant a garden! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on reasons that the school and its students will benefit from the garden to win over the administration. • Consider the type of personality your principal has and take that into account. Will you need to be very serious? Can they handle a joke? • Campaigning can be tiring so be sure to take a break every now and then! Take a week off from meeting or have a pizza party!
4-5	Fundraise!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a List of the items you will need to plant your garden (seeds, shovels, watering cans, etc.) • Brainstorm ideas for fundraising techniques and get started! Try going door to door or setting up a booth at a local grocery store to raise funds. Have as many students as possible get involved and ask local businesses for help. Get teachers involved by asking if there are any grants they can apply to that will supply money to your project. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider asking students if their family have any extra supplies they would be willing to donate.
6	Garden Celebration!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan a celebration day for everyone at the school to help build the garden(s). Have a game plan for what needs to be done and delegate jobs out to volunteers. Make it on a Saturday afternoon and have a pizza party afterwards to thank everyone for their hard work! • Document the event to show its success! Take pictures and use a video camera to show the rest of the community what you have done. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure to thank anyone and everyone who helped you out through your campaign!
Beyond	Follow-up on your work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to keep up the garden and make sure it is taken care of • Encourage teachers to use the area during class time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awesome Job! Keep up the good work!

ALLIES AND RESOURCES

You can't do it alone! Below is a list of potential allies, research resources, and success stories.

Potential Allies

- **Your science teacher.** Teachers that care about the issue and care about their students will want to get involved. Seek out those that you know would take an interest or at least would be willing to listen.
- **Your Principal.** Any changes made to a school have to go through administration, so you will want them on your side! Prepare to impress them with your knowledge and they will take your suggestions seriously.
- **The PTSA.** These involved and dedicated parents would be wonderful to tap into if your administration is on the fence for changing policy. Parents more than anyone are concerned about the health and well-being of their students, and will probably jump to help you if you explain the issue well.
- **The Environmental or Outdoors Club.** These dedicated kids will surely jump in on any campaign to kick carbon to the curb!
- **Local environmental groups:** These are the people who will support your campaign and provide you with additional resources.
- **Local parks, nature centers, or nurseries.** These organizations would likely be willing to work with you on developing an outdoor classroom, especially a garden area. They may be willing to donate plants, structures, and some extra pairs of hands!

Resources

- **More Information on outdoor classrooms and their benefits**
 - DC Schoolyard Greening: A fantastic website for learning everything on how to take the classroom outside (www.dcschoolyardgreen.org).
 - Sustainable Schoolyards: U.S. Botanic Garden's Exhibit on greening your schoolyard. (www.sustainableschoolyard.org).
 - Earth Day Network's Educator's Network: Give this link to your teacher's to show how many environmental and outdoor lesson plans can be incorporated into U.S. Education Standards (<http://ww2.earthday.net/lessonplans>).
 - No Child Left Inside Act: Check out the campaign's [website](#) concerning how to support the Act and learn why it is so important.
 - "The Last Child in the Woods": Book by Richard Louv describing Nature Deficit Disorder and why students need to spend more time outdoors (www.richardlouv.com).
 - [National Gardening Association](#) offers the Web's largest and most respected array of gardening content for consumers and educators, ranging from general information and publications to lessons and grants.
 - [Kids Gardening](#) provides more information on the benefits of youth gardening, instructions on developing a garden, and grants to make it happen.
- **Fundraising Information**
 - Lowe's Outdoor Classroom Grant Program (<http://www.lowes.com/lowes/lkn?action=pg&p=AboutLowe/outdoor/index.html>).
 - Earth Friendly Fundraising (<http://www.greenraising.com>).

- Another Eco-friendly fundraising site (<http://www.go-green-fundraising.com/>).
- [National Gardening Association](#) offers the Web's largest and most respected array of gardening content for consumers and educators, ranging from general information and publications to lessons and grants.
- [Kids Gardening](#) provides more information on the benefits of youth gardening, instructions on developing a garden, and grants to make it happen.
- **Outdoor classroom supplies and “how to”:**
 - Supplies and information for Gardening, rain-barrels, birdhouses, and other outdoor supplies (<http://www.gardeningwithkids.org/>).
 - Information on Greenhouses (www.greenhouses.com)
 - National Wildlife Federation’s Schoolyard Habitats (<http://www.nwf.org/schoolyard/>)
 - Composting at school (http://www.recyclenow.com/home_composting/schools/)
 - [Kids Gardening](#) provides more information on the benefits of youth gardening, instructions on developing a garden, and grants to make it happen.

ⁱ DC Schoolyard Greening. *Why Use Your Schoolyard?* Retrieved March 4, 2009 from <http://www.dcschoolyardgreening.org/gettingstarted/overview.html>.

ⁱⁱ Earth Day Network. *Greening the Curriculum* Retrieved March 4, 2009 from <http://ww2.earthday.net/~earthday/node/42>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tara Parker Pope (2009) *Give Recess its Due*. *The New York Times*. Retrieved March 4, 2009 from http://www.childrenandnature.org/news/detail/new_york_times_give_recess_its_due.

^{iv} Earth Day Network *No Child Left Inside* Retrieved March 5, 2009 from <http://ww2.earthday.net/ncliact>.

^v Education World (2008) *U.S. National Education Standards* Retrieved March 4, 2009 from <http://www.educationworld.com/standards/national/toc/index.shtml#lang>.