



EDUCATION

Outdoor Education Continues in the Cold

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Cindy Soule is a teacher in Portland, Maine, an area known to have extremely cold and snowy winters. But cold weather is not stopping Soule and her students from continuing with **outdoor** learning during the coronavirus pandemic.

Earlier in the school year, students in Soule's fourth-grade class had outdoor lessons on things like **pollination** and **erosion**.

Then, the snow came.

In face coverings and warm clothes, the students took their school supplies outside in **buckets**. Then, they turned the buckets over, put them down in the snow, took a seat and went to work.

The lesson that day centered on snow and the formation of snowflakes.

Schools across the U.S. have pushed for outdoor learning to keep students and teachers safe and stop the spread of COVID-19. Infectious disease experts worldwide have noted that the virus spreads less easily outdoors.

Now, with temperatures dropping in much of the country, some schools have made plans to continue outdoor learning during the winter.

Anne Stires is an outdoor learning expert in Maine. She said the outdoors is "the healthiest, safest place for us to be right now."

“Anything that we can do to get kids outdoors for longer periods of time is **vital**,” Stires added. “This is where we need to be right now.”

In the neighboring state of New Hampshire, fourth- and fifth- grade students are still learning outside at James Faulkner Elementary School in Stoddard. The school created an outdoor classroom by clearing some trees and building an area for warmth by fire.

The students seem to like the outdoor classroom.

“They’re **begging** me to go out,” teacher Amanda Bridges said.

In the western state of Colorado, elementary school students in the Lake County school district study in usual classrooms for half the week. For the other half, they learn outdoors.

For educators, outdoor learning is yet another period of change. Last spring, it was distance learning. Then came hybrid, or mixed, learning methods. Now, educators are trying to keep their students warm enough to learn outside.

Back in Portland, Cindy Soule’s students answer questions about snowflakes. They examine snowflakes with **magnifying glasses**.

Mohamednur Ali is one of Soule’s students. The 9-year-old boy noted some of the differences between hands-on learning outdoors and sitting in a classroom.

“It’s a good thing because you can see the real thing,” Ali said. “We learn what is around us.”

Portland is home to a growing immigrant population. Some of Soule’s fourth-grade students come from places like Somalia, Iraq and Angola.

“We have students with **varying** language needs,” Soule said. The power of learning outdoors is that all learners can gain from the experience, the teacher added.

Outdoor learning may work for rural and **suburban** schools. But it is more difficult for schools in cities, said Daniel Domenech. He is the director of the American Association of School Administrators.

For schools in Portland, the pandemic has marked the first official use of outdoor learning. The aim is to keep it going even after the pandemic ends.

Soule said her students will never forget the pandemic's difficulties. But she said she hopes studying in nature will be among their good memories of 2020.

"They're seeing the outdoors around them and it brings **relevancy** to what they're studying," Soule said. "They will remember that forever."

I'm Armen Kassabian.

David Sharp from Associated Press reported this story. Armen Kassabian adapted it for VOA Learning English. Ashley Thompson was the editor.

Words in This Story

pollination – *n.* to move pollen from one flower to another

erosion – *n.* the process by which something is worn away

outdoor – *n.* done, used, or located outside a building

begging – *v.* to ask (someone) in an emotional way for something needed or wanted very much

buckets – *n.* an open container with a handle that is used especially to hold and carry water and other liquids

varying – *v.* to be different or to become different

suburban – *n.* a residential area near to a city

relevancy – *adj.* relating to a subject in an appropriate way

Are schools open or closed in your country presently? Do you agree that schools should stay open if students can study and learn safely outdoors? We want to hear from you. Write to us in the Comments Section and visit our Facebook page.

