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*Sharing ideas to create a more just
and sustainable future through the
power of environmental education*

CASE STUDY

Washington State Outdoor Preschool Pilot

CONTRIBUTORS

Aliza Yair
Debbie Groff
Christy Merrick

GEEP is a partnership of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Environmental Protection Administration of Taiwan, and the North American Association for Environmental Education.



Washington State Outdoor Preschool Pilot



United Nations Sustainable Development Goals addressed

Overview

Outdoor preschools—schools where children spend the majority of the school day learning outdoors with a nature-focused curriculum—are growing rapidly in the United States. In most states, however, regulatory systems were built for programs that primarily take place indoors, and many licensing requirements don't fit when nature is the classroom. For example, licensing rules may require that classrooms are free from insects, or require programs to furnish and maintain large indoor spaces that are rarely, if ever, used in outdoor preschools. As a result, many outdoor preschools are not licensed, which means that they often must operate with reduced hours, can only serve small numbers of children, and can't accept public funding for early childhood education.

In 2017, the state of Washington embarked on the nation's first pilot project to license outdoor preschools in order to bring outdoor learning opportunities to more children.¹ The state's Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) developed specialized licensing standards for outdoor preschools and monitored a small group of pilot programs from 2018 to 2020. The results were overwhelmingly positive, and in 2021 the state made the program permanent.² States across the country are now looking to Washington and its licensing standards for outdoor preschools as a model for increasing equity in access to outdoor, nature-based learning for all young children.



Photo: Fiddleheads Forest School

Background

In the state of Washington, quality early childhood education is in high demand, with more children in need of care and education than seats in classrooms. And seats in classrooms are expensive, leaving families with lower incomes few options. So in 2017, regulators interested in offering families more affordable choices in high-quality early childhood education started looking outside of classrooms for solutions.

In outdoor, or nature-based, preschools, children and teachers spend the majority of the school day outdoors, using a curriculum focused on the natural world. Numerous studies have shown that nature has proven to provide a particularly enriching setting for education, offering a variety of developmental benefits to children.³ Nature-based preschools are growing rapidly in the United States, and regulators noted that at least 40 such programs were operating in Washington at the time. But without typical indoor classrooms, Washington's outdoor preschools could not be licensed, which made the schools ineligible to participate in state funding programs for early childhood education that help make early education more affordable. Creating a new licensing option for outdoor preschools was seen as an opportunity to both offer more high-quality education to Washington families and to increase children's outdoor time to take advantage of the benefits of nature for children's healthy development.



Approach

In 2017, Washington launched the first pilot program in the United States to license outdoor preschools with a plan to evaluate the schools' safety and effectiveness. New licensing standards were needed to accommodate the largely outdoor setting and the nature-focused curriculum. These standards addressed concerns such as the appropriate teacher-child ratio in outdoor programs; how to safely balance benefits and risks of activities like playing near open water, climbing trees, or using tools; and how to implement a nature-based curriculum that supports children's healthy development while also encouraging their connections with nature. In all, 13 programs participated in the pilot over a two-year period from 2018 to 2020.



Outcomes

Regulators in Washington found that the outdoor preschools in the pilot were a safe and effective option for Washington families, noting physical, cognitive, and social-emotional benefits of the model. Some key findings include:

- Initial analysis indicated that child development outcomes for children qualifying for low-income assistance programs enrolled in outdoor preschools were the same or better than the average outcomes for children enrolled in the same assistance programs statewide.
- Over the two-year period, only one serious injury was reported across all outdoor preschool pilot programs, and the injury was not related to outdoor activities such as climbing trees or using tools. Across all programs monitored by DCYF over the same period, 109 serious injuries were reported.
- A pilot study comparing children's obesity rates at an outdoor preschool pilot site with more traditional indoor preschools revealed that children at the outdoor preschool experienced a 14% decline in obesity compared to no change in obesity for the control group at traditional indoor preschools.
- When educators at one pilot program tracked incidences of challenging behaviors over a two-month period, they found 29 incidents of challenging behaviors indoors but zero incidences outdoors for the same group of children.



Evaluation Plan

Washington DCYF closely monitored outdoor preschools participating in the pilot to track the programs' safety and effectiveness as they operated under the new licensing standards and supported programs in meeting these standards. The agency relied upon data collected within programs about children's learning, development, and behavior; reports from researchers; feedback from partnering agencies; and feedback from pilot programs about the new licensing standards and their implementation.

Lessons Learned

As a result of Washington's outdoor preschool pilot, DCYF recommended that the legislature permanently authorize the agency to license outdoor, nature-based programs, and in May 2021, the governor signed the bill into law.

Washington's pilot has confirmed what researchers, educators, and parents have concluded: Nature-based education for young children is a safe and effective approach to early childhood education that brings a variety of benefits for children's healthy development. In addition to preparing children for kindergarten and beyond, nature-based education offers extended time in nature, a focus on play and personal relationships, opportunities to take healthy risks, and opportunities to build connections to the places where children live.

Specialized licensing options for outdoor programs like those developed in Washington not only help ensure that minimum standards of safety are met, but also help make outdoor preschools accessible to families relying on public funding for early care and education. All children deserve high-quality early education, and all children deserve the opportunity to play and learn in nature on a regular basis. Washington's early leadership in licensing outdoor preschools paves the way for other states to consider similar regulatory changes to encourage outdoor education for young children so that every child can enjoy a childhood in nature.

Specialized licensing options for outdoor programs like those developed in Washington not only help ensure that minimum standards of safety are met, but also help make outdoor preschools accessible to families relying on public funding for early care and education. All children deserve high-quality early education, and all children deserve the opportunity to play and learn in nature on a regular basis.



Resources

Washington Outdoor Preschool Pilot

Senate Bill 5151: Washington's Outdoor Preschool Pilot Standards

Outdoor Preschool Policy Action Framework

Natural Start Alliance Resources Related to Washington Outdoor Preschool Licensing

Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practice Guidebook

Contact

Aliza Yair

Washington Department of Children, Youth, and Families

aliza.yair@dcyf.wa.gov

Debbie Groff

Washington Department of Children, Youth, and Families

debbie.groff@dcyf.wa.gov

Kit Harrington

Natural Start Alliance
North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE)

kit@naaee.org

Christy Merrick

Natural Start Alliance
North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE)

christy@naaee.org



Resources

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2. Washington State Senate, Ways and Means Committee, *Concerning Foster Care and Child Care Licensing by the Department of Children, Youth, and Families*, SB 5151, 67th Legis., 2021, <https://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2021-22/Pdf/Bills/Senate%20Passed%20Legislature/5151-S.PL.pdf?q=20220228143945>.
3. Ming Kuo, Michael Barnes, and Catherine Jordan, "Do Experiences With Nature Promote Learning? Converging Evidence of a Cause-and-Effect Relationship," *Frontiers in Psychology* 10, (February 2019), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00305>; Nicole M. Ardoin and Alison W. Bowers, "Early Childhood Environmental Education: A Systematic Review of the Research Literature," *Educational Research Review* 31, (November 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100353>.

