

# REWRITING THE RULES OF EDUCATION WITH OUR PREK-12 OUTDOOR LEARNING GUIDE



**HMC Architects have been professional, responsive, creative, and most efficient in finding practical solutions, beautiful designs, and installations that best use public funding. They offer leadership and an enjoyable, collaborative experience that is inclusive and timely.”**

**Jema Estrella**

Director, Facilities and Construction  
Los Angeles County of Education

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*For over three-quarters of a century, HMC Architects has provided innovative, sustainable, and progressive solutions to our clients' challenges. This dynamic thinking is central to the way we work. When you partner with HMC, you will see the difference in the HMC Experience. These examples demonstrate how Design for Good has positively impacted our clients and communities.*

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# Goals

## Framework for Outdoor Learning

Provide a framework for planning, designing, and implementing an outdoor learning environment.

## The Importance of Learning Outdoors

Explain the importance of learning outdoors and its physical, mental health, well-being, and academic benefits.

## Stakeholder Engagement

Encourage stakeholder engagement with district leadership, administration, teachers, parents, students, maintenance and operations staff, the community, and outdoor education specialists.

## Overcoming Challenges

Address challenges and concerns for outdoor learning environments by providing tips to overcome roadblocks, improve, and succeed.

## Education Vision and Learning Goals

Identify potential education vision and learning goals for outdoor learning to align with the school district's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP). These goals become guiding principles and priorities when developing outdoor learning environment designs.

## Furniture and Equipment Components

Establish potential furniture and equipment components and the criteria to evaluate them to design an agile learning environment that is flexible and adaptable to accommodate a range of instructional strategies.

## Site Considerations

Offer site considerations for locating the outdoor learning environment, providing hardscape and landscaping, water/power/technology infrastructure needs, and construction logistics.

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Los Angeles  
County  
Office of  
Education  
(LACOE)



**The COVID-19 pandemic compelled educators to re-imagine and unleash their creativity in leveraging outdoor spaces to facilitate the safe return to in-person instruction. Following a year or more of confinement indoors, isolation, and extensive screen time, it had become abundantly clear that students yearn for a connection with the natural world. This connection offers a unique opportunity for cognitive and physical development and addresses a fundamental human need for interaction with nature.**

Recognizing this, HMC Architects collaborated with the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE) to formulate design guidelines aimed at assisting schools and facility professionals create equitable outdoor learning experiences on their campuses. The objective extended beyond short-term solutions; it was a concerted effort to propel our educational environments toward spaces that enhance student success, well-being, and community building.

In September 2020, HMC shared its COVID-19 Campus Reboot Guide with LACOE Director of Facilities and Construction Jema Estrella. We aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the concerns and challenges faced by LACOE's 80 PreK-12 school districts. Estrella introduced us to their 'green team,' a group dedicated to researching and developing options aligned with the needs and desires of students and teachers in outdoor learning environments. These spaces were envisioned as a means for school districts to ensure safe in-person instruction while providing enduring learning opportunities beyond the pandemic's scope.

What set this project apart was its long-term perspective; it wasn't merely about addressing the difficulties of COVID-19 but was rooted in supporting students' academic, socio-emotional, and physical well-being. Our design team comprised diverse design, engineering, and construction collaborators, working closely with LACOE's administrators and educators. Together, we shared a common goal: to research and develop guidelines for creating outdoor learning environments within Los Angeles County and beyond.

LACOE presented us with a formidable challenge: to craft a blueprint for outdoor spaces, complete with a curated selection of furniture from accessible vendors, an ideal landscape for Los Angeles County, and amenities aligned with modern curricula. These designs had to adhere to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health's guidelines, ensure easy supervision, and utilize durable materials that required minimal maintenance. It was also critical that they wouldn't trigger major building code upgrades or Division of the State Architect (DSA) approval, maintain a fast-track schedule of just four weeks, and

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## Project Information

**CLIENT:**  
Los Angeles County  
Office of Education  
(LACOE)

**LOCATION:**  
Downey, California

**COMPLETION:**  
June 2021

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STUDENTS WHO ATTENDED  
OUTDOOR SCHOOL SIGNIFICANTLY  
RAISED THEIR SCIENCE SCORES BY

**26%**

THE OUTDOORS  
HAVE A CALMING  
AND STRESS-  
REDUCING EFFECT  
ON STUDENTS

LEARNING  
WITHIN GREEN  
SPACES CAN HELP  
COMBAT CHILDHOOD  
OBESITY.

**LEARNING  
THRIVES OUTDOORS**



**WHEN CHILDREN CAN  
APPLY WHAT THEY LEARNED IN  
A CLASSROOM TO REAL WORLD  
SCENARIOS THEY CAN BETTER  
RETAIN INFORMATION. AMONG  
ACADEMIC GAINS, WERE SOCIAL  
STUDIES, LANGUAGE ARTS,  
MATH AND SCIENCE.**

**OUTDOOR  
CLASSES CAN  
IMPROVE STUDENT  
FOCUS.**

**79%**

**OF TEACHERS REPORTED  
POSITIVE IMPACTS ON THEIR  
TEACHING PRACTICE**

**92%**

**OF TEACHERS REPORTED THEIR  
STUDENTS WERE MORE ENGAGED  
WHEN LEARNING OUTDOORS**



**A monumental effort but such great reward. I want to thank each of you and the organization you represent for selflessly giving your time and expertise to this effort. This guide is a clear illustration of our care for children and staff.”**

**Jema Estrella**

Director, LACOE 2021

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stay within a budget of \$50,000 for design and installation, qualifying for CARES Act Funding.

The chosen site for implementing and developing these design options was a K-8 public school in an urban residential neighborhood of Los Angeles County. This choice carried profound significance, as access to greenspace in the U.S. is often deeply unequal, particularly for young people growing up in inner-city and low-income communities. In collaboration with LACOE’s green team, school administrators, teachers, and students, HMC led a design charrette to envision three options for an outdoor classroom on this selected site.

Our approach commenced with a thorough examination of potential locations on the campus, considering factors such as existing trees or greenery, proximity to buildings, and natural boundaries like walkways or play areas. The selected site needed to ensure equitable access and utility for students and teachers. Working with stakeholders, we defined the purpose of each learning environment, providing flexibility, adaptability, agility, and accessibility to accommodate a wide array of teaching and learning styles.

Our design team devised a series of modular building blocks to facilitate this vision, offering a flexible framework for crafting various classroom configurations. These blocks could be assembled to create seating, workspaces, shade structures, screening elements, and storage units. We recommended the involvement of local manufacturers or community volunteers

to produce these blocks, thereby reducing costs. We also specified using long-lasting exterior wood to simplify construction and ensure durability. Employing these blocks, we illustrated the three design options, providing detailed renderings to assist school districts in envisioning these spaces on their campuses.

The resulting *Design Guidelines for Outdoor Learning Environments* was published in June 2021 and made available to schools in Los Angeles County and counties across California. Beyond guidelines for creating these learning environments, our guide offers practical advice on logistics, instructional strategies, and conducting outdoor lessons. Interested districts receive guidance on planning, designing, and implementing their outdoor learning environments, complete with essential components encompassing teaching tools, landscaping, and infrastructure. There’s also a section dedicated to potential funding opportunities and requirements for state aid.

The pandemic has ushered in an opportunity for schools to bolster their educational offerings with outdoor environments that enable students to engage directly with nature. It’s a pivotal moment to transform our education system by prioritizing childrens’ holistic needs, encompassing mental health, well-being, and academic success. With this guide in hand, any school can engage its community in creating a cost-effective outdoor learning environment that enhances student success and fosters a deeper connection to the natural world. ●



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## Benefits of Outdoor Learning

- **Boosts academic performance and overall school attendance.**
- **Improves childrens' development of creativity, problem-solving, independence, confidence, and more.**
- **It improves students' health and reduces stress.**
- **Connects us to nature—improving our use of the five senses and inspiring us to become physically active.**
- **Gives children a love and appreciation of their natural surroundings by promoting environmental awareness and stewardship.**
- **Helping kids explore outdoors can boost teacher enjoyment by building a positive class culture and allowing innovative instructional plans and strategies.**
- **Provides practical and real-world experiences in problem-solving, thinking skills, and teamwork.**

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