

Columbia, Missouri Schools Focus on Outdoor Learning and Play Areas

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Even before Covid-19 disrupted much of what teachers and students considered “normal”, the Columbia Public Schools Science Office worked with schools to provide outdoor learning and play spaces. The Covid-19 pandemic has only increased the desire for schools to have outdoor learning spaces for students as that was seen as a safer way to have students gather during a pandemic.

Regardless of the pandemic, research has shown that allowing students to play and learn outside has many benefits that include:

- Outdoor air is fresher, cleaner, and replaced/cycled constantly.
- Student engagement increases when learning outdoors.
- Student attention increases when learning outdoors.
- Student creativity increases when put in a more stimulating environment.
- Behavior issues decrease when learning outdoors
- Social distancing is far easier when learning outdoors.
- Germs are unstable in UV light (they die).
- Fresh air and sunlight are proven to be beneficial to health.

In an effort to provide outdoor learning spaces for as many schools as possible and as quickly as possible, the Columbia Public Schools Science Office partnered with the community and worked with staff, students, and parents to build natural areas around schools that could be created anywhere as they cost very little compared to traditional indoor learning spaces and traditional playgrounds. The average cost for a new Nature Learning and Play area costs us about \$2,500 while the same-sized traditional playground costs about \$30,000. Much of this savings is thanks to volunteers building the entire area on their own. While the pandemic has been quite disruptive, one positive is that schools will now have wonderful outdoor learning and play areas that will provide last benefits well beyond the pandemic crisis.

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