



PLANNING GUIDE



The **Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program** provides technical assistance and support to educators, administrators, students, and community volunteers who wish to create sustainable wildlife habitats that can be used as outdoor classroom sites on their school grounds.

These **outdoor classroom sites** provide hands-on learning opportunities and allow students of all ages to utilize multi-disciplinary skills in a fun and exciting environment.

The **Alabama Outdoor Classroom Planning Guide** provides step-by-step advice on how best to create an outdoor classroom site through the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program, along with valuable tips to help schools develop Outdoor Classrooms that are **effective** as educational tools and **sustainable** for many years to come.

BENEFITS of an OUTDOOR CLASSROOM

developed through the
Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program

- provides an alternative classroom setting
- includes learning stations for hands-on activities
- introduces students to nature and the outdoors
- provides multi-disciplinary teaching/learning opportunities
- increases local community and business support for the school
- increases parent involvement in the school
- establishes habitat for local wildlife
- helps beautify the campus
- provides teaching/learning opportunities about wildlife and related natural resources
- engages students in active, hands-on/minds-on learning
- provides real-world experiences in a living laboratory
- creates fun and exciting learning environments
- helps connect students to their environments and communities
- makes learning locally relevant
- enhances biodiversity
- helps teachers and administrators reach out to at-risk students
- offers alternative teaching strategies for learning-disabled students
- provides service-learning projects for students
- develops a sense of stewardship in our children for the Earth's natural resources
- provides opportunities for students to work as a team
- demonstrates to students that they can make a difference
- helps combat childhood obesity
- teaches responsibility
- provides an alternative to costly field trips
- excites educators about teaching
- and motivates students about learning.

Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program PLANNING GUIDE

Publisher: Alabama Wildlife Federation

State Headquarters: Alabama Wildlife Federation, 3050 Lanark Road, Millbrook, AL 36054

Author and Editor: April Lupardus Waltz, Alabama Wildlife Federation

Resources and References: *Developing an Outdoor Classroom to Provide Education Naturally*, University of Tennessee Extension, Craig C. Kimbro (<http://www.utextension.utk.edu/publications/wfiles/w113.pdf>); *Georgia Schoolyard Wildlife Habitat Planning Guide* and *Planning First to Make Your Outdoor Classroom Last: A Best Management Practices Guide for Creating and Sustaining Outdoor Classrooms in Georgia*, Georgia Wildlife Federation (<http://www.gwf.org>); Oregon State University Extension Office's 4-H Wildlife Stewards Program (<http://4hwildlifestewards.org>); *Schoolyard Habitats' Site Planning Guide*, National Wildlife Federation (<http://www.nwf.org/schoolyard/>)

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Design: Reid/O'Donahue Advertising, Inc., and Marla Ruskin, Alabama Wildlife Federation, Communications Specialist

Printer: Davis Direct, Inc.

Special thanks to the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program partners and supporters: Alabama Wildlife Federation, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, Alabama Cooperative Extension System, Alabama Forestry Commission, Alabama Power Foundation, *Discovering Alabama*, and the National Wildlife Federation.

In addition, special thanks to the educators, administrators, parents, students, and community volunteers who share their insight and creativity and provide wonderful models for other schools across Alabama.

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Alabama Wildlife Federation Online Outdoor Classroom Resources

- ❖ Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program Overview
- ❖ Educator Workshop Dates & Locations
- ❖ Outdoor Classroom Planning Guide & Checklists
- ❖ Schoolyard Wildlife Habitat Tips
- ❖ Outdoor Learning Station Ideas & Project Plans
- ❖ Outdoor Classroom Activities & Lesson Plans
- ❖ Outdoor Classroom Grants, Funding & Support
- ❖ Outdoor Classroom Work Day Planning Material
- ❖ Outdoor Classroom Maintenance Tips
- ❖ Outdoor Classroom Schools Map
- ❖ Alabama Outdoor Classroom E-newsletter



Click on the Butterfly Icon in the top left corner of ANY webpage on the AWF's website at <https://www.alabamawildlife.org/>.





Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program Partners

The Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) and Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) first created the Alabama Outdoor Classroom (AOC) Program in 1997, and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System joined the partnership in 2004 to help AWF and ADCNR provide technical assistance and support for enrolled AOC schools.



The Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) is the oldest and largest non-profit, conservation organization in Alabama. Sportsmen established the AWF in 1935 to promote the conservation and wise use of our wildlife and natural resources and to

ensure a high quality of life for future generations of Alabamians. AWF is funded through AWF memberships, the AWF license plate (*right*), grants, and donations.

Some of AWF's other conservation education programs include:

- ❖ Discovering Our Heritage Program
- ❖ Educator Workshops
- ❖ *Alabama Wildlife Magazine*
- ❖ *Managing Wildlife Book*



AWF's Alabama Nature Center

- ❖ ANC General Public Weekends
- ❖ ANC On Tour
- ❖ Expedition Lanark Summer Day Camp
- ❖ Lanark Field Day Field Trips

For more info: www.alabamawildlife.org
AWF, 3050 Lanark Road, Millbrook, AL 36054
1-800-822-9453

The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) is the state agency responsible for the management and protection of Alabama's wildlife and natural resources. Totally funded by hunting and fishing licenses along with the Alabama Wildlife Heritage License, other ADCNR conservation education programs include:

- ❖ Growing Up WILD
- ❖ Project WILD /Aquatic WILD & Project WET
- ❖ Hunter Education Classes
- ❖ Waterfowl Stamp Art Contest
- ❖ Archery in the Schools

For more info: www.outdooralabama.com
ADCNR, 64 N. Union Street, Montgomery, AL 36130
(334) 242-3151



The Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) is the primary outreach organization for the land-grant mission of Alabama A&M University and Auburn University. ACES has offices in all of Alabama's 67 counties and delivers

research-based educational programs that enable people to improve their quality of life and economic well-being. ACES provides a wide variety of conservation programs related to agriculture, forestry and natural resources which include:

- ❖ 4-H and Youth Development
- ❖ Junior Naturalist Program
- ❖ Junior Master Gardener Program
- ❖ Alabama Master Naturalist Program
- ❖ Master Gardener Program
- ❖ ACES Publications

For more info: www.aces.edu
A&M University, ACES, School of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, 4900 Meridian Street, Normal, AL 35762
Auburn University, ACES, College of Agriculture, Auburn, AL 36849
A&M: (256) 372-5783 / Auburn: (334) 844-2345

Additional Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program Partners and Supporters





The Outdoor Classroom Philosophy:

Providing Hands-on, Minds-On Conservation Education Opportunities

Alabama's educators are some of the most creative, dedicated people anyone could ever meet. In addition to their roles as instructors, counselors and mentors, they spend countless hours researching the most innovative and effective teaching methods they can find to help provide the highest quality education possible for Alabama's students. Although their students may change from year to year, teachers' overall educational goals remain the same:

- ❖ Actively engage students in their education,
- ❖ Increase students' enthusiasm for learning,
- ❖ Effectively teach all students regardless of any disabilities,
- ❖ Reduce behavioral and disciplinary problems,
- ❖ Improve student performance and achievement, and
- ❖ Help produce responsible citizens.

Luckily, for educators across Alabama, they need to look no further than the Alabama Outdoor Classroom (AOC) program. Numerous studies demonstrate that outdoor classrooms can be utilized as educational tools to help teachers achieve these goals and many more. The AOC program utilizes the "hands-on, minds-on" learning philosophy as a major component of the program, which has proven to be a very successful, engaging and exciting teaching strategy that reaches a diverse group of students, reduces disciplinary issues, improves student achievement, and instills in students a sense of responsibility.

Hands-on, Minds-on Learning

Hands-on, minds-on teaching methods involve the students in a total learning experience which enhances students' ability to think critically. Since children are inherent observers and explorers, the most effective approach to learning should capitalize on these intrinsic abilities.

The following Chinese proverb illustrates the hands-on learning philosophy best:



Students have the opportunity to observe wildlife in its natural environment like the black swallowtail caterpillar on its host plant (fennel) in this butterfly garden.

Doyle Kearsal

*I hear and I forget,
I see and I remember,
I do and I understand
-Chinese Proverb*

Students, like many of us, retain information longer and understand a concept better when they learn it through a practical, hands-on activity. For example, which of the following strategies would make the greatest impact on you? To read about the life cycle of a butterfly, or to witness first-hand the metamorphosis of a butterfly egg into a caterpillar and then the caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly? When a lesson, such as this one, is enhanced with a real-world experience, the concept being taught is more thought-provoking and more relevant to the students.

Teaching in an Outdoor Classroom

Outdoor classroom sites developed through the AOC program include a variety of learning stations and activities that help educators provide direct, tangible experiences for their students that make hands-on, minds-on learning possible. Many of the nature-based activities developed for the AOC program are designed around this strategy and can be used in conjunction



As plants grow, students can utilize their math skills to measure the plants' size (on left) and calculate their growth rates over time. Then, as plants die, the students can help collect the plants' seeds (on right) so that they can plant them again the following year.

with current Alabama State Department of Education programs including the Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative. Many of these activities are also correlated to the Alabama Course of Study Objectives, and can be easily found in the “OC Activities & Lesson Plans” section of the Alabama Wildlife Federation website. To help schools develop outdoor classroom sites that utilize this learning strategy and include these types of quality, hands-on activities, the AOC program partners provide a variety of educator workshops throughout the year including free, on-site in-service workshops for the whole faculty.

Actively Engage Students

By being engaged in real-world experiences in a living laboratory, students take part in in-depth investigations using objects, materials, experiences, skills and ideas to draw meaning from and develop a greater understanding for the topic they are studying. This means that the students are active participants in their own learning instead of passive learners who simply listen to lectures, read text books, and learn to regurgitate what they have memorized. The students quite literally “manipulate” the things in their environment that they are studying such as plants, rocks, insects, and water while using scientific instruments such as rulers, balances, test tubes, thermometers, nets, microscopes, and calculators to collect and interpret the data. This encourages higher-level thinking skills such as planning, deduction, and complex problem solving.

These multi-disciplinary activities can also engage students by enhancing their understanding of how “it all fits together.” Students are equipped with the necessary tools (math and language skills), the knowledge (social studies and sciences), and the ingenuity (creativity and higher-thinking skills) to understand how the different subjects they are studying are related, and how to apply their knowledge and skills to solve real-world problems. This makes learning much more meaningful.

For example, let's look at the learning opportunities when students participate in an interdisciplinary activity as simple as vegetable gardening in an outdoor classroom setting. Students can:

- ❖ Research what crops were grown by Native Americans and what crops are grown by Alabama farmers today;
- ❖ Analyze the acidity of the soil in their gardens to determine if any “enhancements” need to be made to the soil;
- ❖ Calculate how many seeds are needed for the allotted space in their garden and the growth rate of their seeds as they grow into plants and vegetables;
- ❖ Build a scarecrow for the garden using their creativity, artistic skills and teamwork;
- ❖ Study what types of local wildlife might utilize the vegetables in the garden as a food source;
- ❖ Discuss the impact pollination has on our food sources,

and research the native bees and other pollinators found in Alabama;

- ❖ Research how to utilize environmentally-friendly pest management techniques to increase the crop production;
- ❖ Discuss their sensory observations including the different colors, smells, textures, sounds and tastes produced by the vegetable garden;
- ❖ Study the different parts of plants and how different vegetables have different root systems;
- ❖ Keep a journal of the growth and development of their vegetables, including a growth rate chart to estimate when the vegetables would be ready to eat;
- ❖ Research the health benefits associated with eating the different types of vegetables;
- ❖ Harvest and eat the vegetables they have grown, thus learning where vegetables come from instead of assuming that the food they eat “magically” appears in the grocery store; and
- ❖ Donate some of the vegetables to a local food bank as a service learning project.

These hands-on, outdoor activities are just a few examples of how creative teachers can utilize a vegetable garden as an educational tool, and this list does not include the numerous other activities that can be conducted in conjunction with other outdoor classroom “learning stations” such as a butterfly garden, aquatic study area, or song bird sanctuary.

Increase Students’ Enthusiasm

Teaching strategies based on the natural world also appeal to

children’s innate curiosity in nature and the outdoors. Students become excited about lessons when they have the opportunity to go outside and explore their environment. Furthermore, when students believe that the information they are studying is relevant to their lives and their community, and when they gain a greater appreciation for the interconnectedness

between what they are learning and their natural environment, they often strive to learn more about the topic. How better to draw these connections and excite students than in their very own schoolyard wildlife habitat and outdoor classroom area that they helped to develop?

Jennifer Whitman



Students enjoy getting their hands dirty when given the opportunity as they work in their garden.

When third grade students at Eclectic Elementary in Elmore County, Alabama, were questioned about their feelings regarding the school’s outdoor classroom, the students’ responses supported the “hands-on, minds-on” learning philosophy and demonstrated students’ enthusiasm for being outdoors:

I like to go outside to watch the birds and animals. I remember more of what I do and not much of what I read. We watch the animals and plants in their habitats. We plant seeds to help the soil. I like to observe bugs. – Joseph Ammons

An outdoor classroom is good because you can learn to love nature. I like to just sit in the sun, alone, and watch the birds and listen to the wind. I like to create things for animals to use. My class likes to plant flowers so that we know the bees and butterflies will come. Going outside to observe is much better than being trapped inside. – Kayson Wallace

I like to do experiments like digging in the dirt and growing plants. It’s hard to do that in our inside classroom. I learn more outside. – Matt Bice

Reaching ALL Students

The AOC program advocates the use of the outdoor classroom and related “learning stations” for **all** of the school’s students in **all** grade levels. All students are encouraged to participate in the school’s outdoor classroom from the very beginning stages of development on through the use and maintenance of the outdoor classroom site, even if the students have physical limitations, learning disabilities, or behavioral problems.

Studies have found that students with these types of limitations often benefit the most from hands-on activities that engage all of their senses; however, in the past, it was difficult to find activities that met the needs of a diverse group of students with varying disabilities. Thankfully, the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) created *Access Nature*, a conservation education activity guide

(available through the NWF website) that provides a bounty of engaging, exciting activities that can be used with students who have a wide variety of challenges including hearing, cognitive, motor and visual disabilities. Thus, each activity can be used with most, if not all, students regardless of their mental or

physical capabilities, and nearly all of the activities can be used in conjunction with an outdoor classroom site.

Reduce Disciplinary Problems

Outdoor classrooms also expand the traditional classroom beyond the typical 30 desks, 30 chairs, and 30 books environment into an alternative classroom setting that is fun and exciting. Students who appear bored and/or disruptive in an indoor classroom often will thrive when taken outdoors. They are more eager to learn and more motivated to actively participate in activities because their curiosity is heightened and their desire to explore takes over.

Most outdoor classroom areas offer a beautiful, serene learning environment that contrasts to the hustle and bustle of students' chaotic everyday lives and allows them a greater opportunity for reflection, contemplation, observation and inspiration. This can be therapeutic for all students but especially at-risk students with behavioral problems, thus helping teachers and administrators reach out to these students in a tranquil, non-threatening environment. Students with emotional problems also respond well to the types of hands-on sensory activities that can be conducted in the outdoors.

Furthermore, studies suggest that students who participate in a greater amount of physical activities tend to have fewer behavioral problems. An outdoor classroom can provide a great amount of fun, physical activity through the use of gardening, outdoor games, maintenance activities, and simply being active

in the outdoors. This increased physical activity can also reduce attention deficits, heighten beneficial hormones, and help reduce childhood obesity while increasing a student's self-esteem.

Improve Student Achievement

In addition to reducing disciplinary problems, multiple studies have highlighted the benefits of utilizing hands-on, outdoor activities to promote cross-curricular learning, student motivation, critical thinking skills and information retention. For instance, a study conducted by a panel of experts including Cynthia Klemmer, Director of Education and Development at the National Gardening Association; T.M. Waliczek, Associate Professor at Texas State University; and J.M. Zajicek, Professor of Horticultural Sciences at Texas A&M University, found that a group of third, fourth and fifth grade students involved in a gardening program scored significantly higher on a science achievement test than another group of students who were not involved in the program and were taught only through the use of traditional teaching methods.

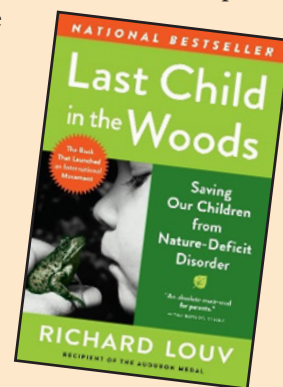
Another study performed by Julie Athman Ernst and Martha Monroe reviewed the effect of environment-based education (compared to the traditional classroom setting) on ninth and twelfth grade students' critical thinking skills. The study found that students participating in the environmental education programs had significantly raised scores on the Cornell Critical Thinking Test at both grade levels. When reviewing the results, teachers explained that utilizing the "environment as an integrating context" increased the students' test scores by

Restore Children's Connection to the Outdoors & Nature

While trying to create a productive, outdoor learning environment for their students, many educators have realized that a vast majority of their students have become disconnected from the outdoors and nature. These observations are echoed by Richard Louv, in his latest book titled *Last Child in the Woods*. Louv explores the growing trend that many of us see on a daily basis: Our children are choosing computer games and televisions over the outdoor adventures that we enjoyed while we were growing up. He refers to this disconnection as "nature-deficit disorder," and includes numerous examples from the thousands of children, parents and educators he interviewed during his research. One quote from a fourth-grader he encountered demonstrates this trend poignantly, "I like to play indoors better, 'cause that's where all the electrical outlets are."

In his writings, Louv links nature-deficit disorder to disturbing childhood trends such as rises in obesity and attention deficit disorders. However, he further explains how experiences in nature can be therapeutic for these childhood maladies. He writes, "As one scientist puts it, we can now assume that just as children need good nutrition and adequate sleep, they may very well need contact with nature." He demonstrates how direct exposure to nature is essential for healthy childhood development as it engages children's senses, providing solace and peace while at the same time a "wildness" that piques children's curiosity. More specifically, he explains how utilizing our very own backyards for "environment-based" educational opportunities can dramatically improve students' learning potential and decrease behavioral problems.

Through the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program, we strive to convert empty schoolyards into biologically-rich natural environments where students can explore the outdoors and connect with nature, which will improve the quality of life for Alabama's children and create a new generation of concerned citizens who have the passion for wildlife and the outdoors and the knowledge to help conserve it.





Students can become scientists as they analyze flora and fauna specimens found in the schoolyard wildlife habitat and outdoor classroom.

incorporating the following:

- ❖ multi-disciplinary activities that were tied together using the environment as a common theme;
- ❖ projects that required students to state a hypothesis, conduct research, and investigate environmental issues;
- ❖ learning opportunities where students took on the responsibility of selecting their own projects, goals and action plans; and
- ❖ opportunities for students to utilize critical thinking skills as they participate in locally-relevant activities that are connected to their communities.

Produce Responsible Citizens

Just as importantly, an outdoor classroom also provides opportunities for students to work as a team, and see what can be accomplished with teamwork and community support. The community involvement, parental participation, and local business support for the school's outdoor classroom can create an infectious atmosphere that builds excitement throughout the school from the students all the way up to the administration.

Outdoor classroom projects can also provide opportunities for students to give something back to their community, providing numerous service-learning projects for students whether they harvest vegetables for the hungry, put together vases of flowers for local nursing homes, or clean up litter around a local watershed. The AOC philosophy emphasizes the importance of having the students involved in ALL aspects of the outdoor classroom development, use and maintenance, to teach the students responsibility for their community, and to help students develop a sense of ownership for their "backyard."

As human populations continue to grow and expand, we place increasing demands on Alabama's natural resources while losing vital habitat for wildlife. An outdoor classroom, however,

Proven Benefits of Teaching Outdoors



According to the American Institutes for Research's 2005 study "Effects of Outdoor Education Programs for Children in California," children who participated in science activities in outdoor classrooms:

- ❖ Raised their science scores by 27 percent;
- ❖ Retained information for six to ten weeks after the activities occurred; and
- ❖ Demonstrated significantly larger gains than the control group in self-esteem, conflict resolution, relationship with peers, problem solving, motivation to learn, and behavior in class.

According to Stephen R. Kellert's "Building for Life: Designing and Understanding the Human-Nature Connection," outdoor education supports the emotional, behavioral and intellectual development of children.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends for children to participate in healthy outdoor activities in nature because nature has the potential to improve one's physical, mental, and social health.

can help students reverse that trend. Your outdoor classroom site can enhance the aesthetics and wildlife habitat around the school's campus and throughout the community as a whole, while also helping youth to understand their link to the natural environment and the need to conserve and manage these resources and habitat.

Start Today!

Through the AOC program, students will have the opportunity to experience nature first-hand as they help develop and maintain your school's outdoor classroom, and as teachers utilize the site for hands-on, minds-on learning opportunities. Educators will not only have a sustainable and effective outdoor learning laboratory but they will also have the resources and activities to integrate environmental education into their curriculum, making the best use of their outdoor classroom. We look forward to working with you to help provide more hands-on, outdoor learning opportunities for your students, so they become more excited about learning, gain a greater understanding of complex concepts, learn how to apply that knowledge to real-world situations, develop a sense of responsibility, and become informed, productive citizens with a strong conservation ethic.

Frequently Asked Questions



What is the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program?

The Alabama Outdoor Classroom (AOC) program provides on-site assistance and technical support to educators, administrators, students, and community volunteers who wish to create sustainable wildlife habitats and effective outdoor classroom sites on their school grounds.

To participate in the AOC program, a school must formally enroll in the program and follow the steps discussed in the Outdoor Classroom Planning Guide throughout the development, certification and use of their outdoor classroom site.

What is an Outdoor Classroom?

An outdoor classroom site includes outdoor area(s) on the school grounds that provide hands-on learning opportunities and allows students of all ages to utilize multi-disciplinary skills including math, science, social studies, and language arts in a fun and exciting environment.

An outdoor classroom can be as small as a courtyard or several acres in size.

An outdoor classroom site is designed to provide habitat (food, water, cover, and places to raise young) for local wildlife, and provide opportunities for students to observe wildlife and explore nature.

How do you use an Outdoor Classroom as an educational tool?

It only takes a little creativity to turn a school's campus into a living laboratory and outdoor classroom. Review the course of study objectives and topics that you already teach, and research activity ideas that would teach these objectives and topics using hands-on, multi-curricular, outdoor activities.

Free outdoor classroom activities and lesson plans are available on the Alabama Wildlife Federation's website including themed activities that incorporate wildlife such as birds and butterflies along with field journal activities that help teach specific science, math and language arts course of study standards.

In addition, there are many citizen science projects such as the Cornell University's Great Backyard Bird Count, Journey North's Monarch Butterfly Migration, and California Academy of Science's iNaturalist program.

What is an outdoor learning station?

An outdoor learning station is an area developed to help teach about a specific topic such as a weather station, vegetable garden, or pollinator garden. The outdoor learning station may also include habitat created for specific wildlife species such as a frog pond, butterfly garden or bluebird box trail. These learning stations provide a wealth of hands-on, cross-curricular, outdoor activities and real-world, learning experiences.



Which schools can participate in the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program?

All Alabama K-12 public and private schools.

How long will it take to develop an Outdoor Classroom at our school?

Many schools choose to develop their outdoor classroom in phases, taking anywhere from two to five years to complete all phases and projects. It is important to remember that outdoor classroom and schoolyard wildlife habitat projects offer teaching opportunities and student involvement from their inception even if they change from year to year. The most sustainable and effective projects are those that are developed slowly and methodically following a master plan, taking advantage of the teaching opportunities every step of the way.

What are the benefits of enrolling in the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program?

After enrolling in the program, Outdoor Classroom schools receive the following for **FREE**:

- ❖ Outdoor Classroom Planning Guides for their planning committees;
- ❖ Technical and organizational assistance for their planning committees throughout all phases of development, certification, and use of the outdoor classroom sites;
- ❖ On-site consultations with Alabama Wildlife Federation Outdoor Classroom Consultants who have been trained to assist schools with the development of their outdoor classrooms;
- ❖ In-service teacher training workshops to equip teachers with cross-curriculum activities and materials that can be integrated into their daily lesson plans and used in the outdoor classrooms;
- ❖ Eligibility to apply for Alabama Wildlife Federation Outdoor Classroom Grants when available; and
- ❖ Alabama Outdoor Classroom Certification and National Wildlife Federation Schoolyard Habitat * Certification.

How much does an Outdoor Classroom cost?

Remember—you can take your students outside today to enjoy hands-on, outdoor activities at no cost. However, schools that wish to enhance their schoolyards with wildlife habitats and outdoor learning stations may develop outdoor classroom sites using anywhere from \$1,000 to \$20,000. The costs vary depending on your project plans, what materials and labor you can get donated, and how much money your school can raise through fundraisers and grants. Part of the educational value of an outdoor classroom is the inherent opportunity to be creative and resourceful. A little ingenuity can go a long way in showing a child the power of “reuse and recycle,” which will reduce your costs considerably.

Who will do all of the work?

An outdoor classroom project offers a wonderful opportunity for the school and surrounding community to work together to enrich the educational opportunities for the students in their community. Your local Outdoor Classroom (OC) Consultant can help your school’s outdoor classroom planning committee organize OC Work Days to develop the outdoor classroom and create a long-term maintenance plan. At OC Work Days, teachers, students, parents and community volunteers work side-by-side to help build the various outdoor learning stations and/or help maintain the outdoor classroom from year to year. We encourage you to contact your local OC Consultant for technical assistance and to use the free planning materials on the Alabama Wildlife Federation’s website to plan your work day events and maintenance projects.



What steps should you take to become a certified Outdoor Classroom school?

Follow the steps below and utilize the suggestions, checklists and resources in your Outdoor Classroom Planning Guide and on the Alabama Wildlife Federation's website:

- Step 1:** Collect & Share Information
- Step 2:** Organize Planning Committee
- Step 3:** Enroll in AOC Program
- Step 4:** Evaluate your Campus
- Step 5:** Develop Master Plan
- Step 6:** Obtain Funding & Support
- Step 7:** Construct the Outdoor Classroom
- Step 8:** Integrate the OC into your Curriculum
- Step 9:** Establish a Maintenance Plan
- Step 10:** Certify your Outdoor Classroom

How do you know when you're ready to certify your Outdoor Classroom site?

You are ready for certification once you and your planning committee have accomplished the following:

- ❖ An active planning committee that meets at least four times a year;
- ❖ A sustainable Master Plan with short-term and long-term goals;
- ❖ Outdoor learning stations with educational signage;
- ❖ Hands-on, multi-curricular outdoor activities;
- ❖ A Wildlife Habitat for local wildlife;
- ❖ An in-service Outdoor Classroom Workshop for the faculty;
- ❖ A maintenance plan including summer maintenance; and
- ❖ An outdoor classroom that you are ready to present as a model for other schools across Alabama.

For more details?

- ❖ Review the steps and suggestions in the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Planning Guide.
- ❖ Visit the Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) website at <https://www.alabamawildlife.org/> and use the free online planning materials and resources.
- ❖ Contact April Lupardus Waltz, AWF Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program Coordinator, at aprilwaltz@alabamawildlife.org to ask questions and set up a free on-site visit with your local AWF Outdoor Classroom Consultant.



Before you begin the development of your outdoor classroom, take the time to **collect information** about how to develop an outdoor classroom site through the Alabama Outdoor Classroom (AOC) Program. Then share this information with your faculty and staff so that everyone understands the benefits of using an outdoor classroom as an educational tool and the commitment required to sustain the outdoor classroom from year to year. This will increase the ownership and participation of the faculty throughout the life of your outdoor classroom. Below are some suggestions on how to get started.



Trained Outdoor Classroom Consultants provide free on-site consultations for schools interested in developing an outdoor classroom for hands-on learning opportunities.

- ☐ **Contact the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program** at oc@alabamawildlife.org to help guide you through the development of your outdoor classroom.
- ☐ **Attend an Outdoor Classroom Workshop** to learn how to develop an effective, sustainable outdoor classroom site through the AOC program. Visit the *Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) website for Educator Workshop dates and locations.*
- ☐ **Sign up for the AWF's Outdoor Classroom eNewsletter** to receive updates about grant opportunities, activity ideas, and maintenance tips by clicking on the "envelope" icon in the top right corner of any AWF webpage. *(Be sure to choose "AWF Outdoor Classroom eNewsletter".)*
- ☐ **Visit other enrolled Outdoor Classroom schools** that have already developed an outdoor classroom area to get advice and ideas from their teachers. Each outdoor classroom will reflect the personality of the school and yours will be unique, but learning from the experience of other schools will help you get started on the right foot. *For OC schools' contact info, click on your county in our Alabama Outdoor Classroom Schools Map on AWF's website.*
- ☐ **Create an Outdoor Classroom Resource Area** in a central location such as your library where you can store a filing cabinet or bookshelf to keep track of all of your photographs, meeting notes, maps, maintenance plans,

Free Online Outdoor Classroom Resources

Alabama Wildlife Federation Website

- ❖ Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program Overview
- ❖ Educator Workshops Dates & Locations
- ❖ OC Planning Guide & Checklists
- ❖ Schoolyard Wildlife Habitat Tips
- ❖ Outdoor Learning Station Ideas & Project Plans
- ❖ OC Activities & Lesson Plans
- ❖ OC Grants, Funding & Support
- ❖ OC Work Day Planning Material
- ❖ OC Maintenance Tips
- ❖ Alabama Outdoor Classroom Schools Map
- ❖ Alabama Outdoor Classroom E-newsletter

Alabama Outdoor Classroom on Pinterest

- ❖ Hands-on Outdoor Activity Ideas
- ❖ Outdoor Classroom Learning Stations
- ❖ Outdoor Science, Sensory & Music Stations
- ❖ Butterfly & Pollinator Habitat
- ❖ School Garden Ideas
- ❖ Weather Stations
- ❖ Outdoor Art Projects
- ❖ Outdoor Educational Signs
- ❖ Outdoor Classroom Seating
- ❖ Nature Paths
- ❖ And more...

budgets, receipts, activity guides, and resource material. Keeping records of what you are doing now will greatly assist others who come after you.

- ☐ **Go online** to gather ideas from websites and Pinterest about how schools utilize outdoor classrooms and schoolyard wildlife habitats as outdoor learning stations and education tools.

Once you have collected the appropriate information, it is now time to **share the information with key people** to garner as much support for the outdoor classroom as you can. Again, you should discuss your ideas with everyone at the beginning of the project before you break ground to gauge the interest and feasibility of the project and to make sure that everyone feels included. Below are some key people who you should contact along with some potential items that you might want to discuss with them.



The school's principal can be one of the greatest supporters for the outdoor classroom project by attending planning committee meetings, writing grant proposals for specific learning stations, identifying local businesses that could provide support, and promoting the use of the outdoor classroom as an educational tool.

Administrators

☐ **Discuss the AOC program resources** and your project ideas with the principal including:

- ❖ What concerns does the principal have, if any? If there are any liability or vandalism issues, share the "Tips to Reduce Vandalism" on page 22 and in the Maintenance Tips section of AWF's website.
- ❖ How will teachers handle bee stings, mosquito bites or poison ivy? Make sure all teachers understand to take the same steps as they would on the playground if a child gets a bee sting or mosquito bite. If a child comes in contact with poison ivy, send her/him to the nurse's station to wash the area with an urushiol oil remover like Tecnu.
- ❖ Which, if any, of the building codes apply to the outdoor classroom? For example, does the school system have any special regulations regarding the depth of aquatic habitats such as fish ponds?
- ❖ How will the outdoor classroom be used as an educational tool by the faculty? Share the article entitled "The Outdoor Classroom Philosophy: Providing Hands-on Minds-on Conservation Education Opportunities" from pages 4-8 in this planning guide.
- ❖ How will the outdoor classroom area be maintained? What are the current maintenance practices? Discuss the OC Maintenance Tips, including the Adopt-a-Learning-Station program, found on page 34 and in the Maintenance Tips section of AWF's website.
- ❖ Where are some potential sites on the campus for the

outdoor classroom area(s)? You should choose a site that is easily and quickly accessible to all teachers.

- ❖ What areas on the campus (if any) should be avoided for outdoor classroom use? Are there any future construction plans for the current campus including new buildings, playgrounds, sports fields, parking lots, or portables?
- ❖ Are there any sources of money available for the outdoor classroom development and/or for outdoor activity materials?

☐ **Get administrative approval** from the principal.

☐ **Discuss the project** with the school system administrators such as the Superintendent of Education if needed.

School Faculty & Staff

☐ **Send an email** to oc@alabamawildlife.org to request a faculty presentation from your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant to learn about the different types of outdoor learning stations you could include in your outdoor classroom site and the types of support and resources provided through the AOC Program.

☐ **Present the information** that you learned at the Outdoor Classroom Workshop along with the tips and learning station ideas from the local Outdoor Classroom schools you visited at a faculty meeting.

☐ **Contact your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant** to set up a free online faculty survey to gauge their interest



Get to know the folks at your local Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) office if you do not already know them. ACES has an office in every county of Alabama, and their knowledgeable agents can help you with native plant suggestions, vegetable garden tips, nature-based activities, and more.

in developing an outdoor classroom for hands-on learning opportunities, to determine any concerns they may have, and to find out which faculty members would like to serve on the outdoor classroom planning committee.

Students

- ☐ **Discuss the purpose** of the outdoor classroom and schoolyard wildlife habitat with your students.
- ☐ **Include your students** as much as possible in the design of the outdoor classroom, in the construction phases, and with maintenance and clean-ups to help foster feelings of ownership and prevent vandalism and littering.

School Buildings and Maintenance Department

- ☐ **Discuss your outdoor classroom project ideas** with your school's custodians and/or grounds keepers to get their feedback.
- ☐ **Ask about any maintenance issues** or other concerns in the proposed outdoor classroom site(s) that will require assistance from the maintenance department or impact their current maintenance and mowing practices.

Parents

- ☐ **Give an Outdoor Classroom presentation** to your PTA/PTO including learning station ideas from your visits with other OC schools to explain how outdoor classrooms can be used as an educational tool and what your plans are for your school's outdoor classroom. You can also use slides from the "Intro to the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program" powerpoint on AWF's website.

- ☐ **Provide updates** about your school's outdoor classroom development plans on your school's website and/or Facebook page.
- ☐ **Ask the PTA/PTO** to include an allocation for the outdoor classroom in their budget each year for activity materials and outdoor classroom maintenance.

Local Community

- ☐ **Contact your local representatives** from your board of education, city council and county commission to inform them of your outdoor classroom plans as they may be able to provide support with construction or maintenance projects.
- ☐ **Contact your county's Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) office** to ask how they can assist with the outdoor classroom projects and how they can provide nature-based activities and curriculum. They may also be able to help you contact local Master Gardeners who would be able to assist your school.
- ☐ **Contact your local school clubs** (Beta Club, Science Club, Junior Master Gardeners, Future Farmers of America, 4-H Club, Junior Naturalists, etc) to see how they would like to get involved.
- ☐ **Contact local community organizations and churches** to see how they can assist. *See the Community Support & Resources List in the OC Grants, Funding & Support section of AWF's website.*



After you have informed key people about your outdoor classroom plans, you need to **organize your planning committee**. An outdoor classroom cannot be effectively sustained or used as an educational tool if only one or two teachers try to develop, use and maintain it by themselves. Tips for how to organize your planning committee are below.

Create your Outdoor Classroom Planning Committee

After your Outdoor Classroom Consultant provides the faculty presentation about the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program, the consultant will set up a free online survey so that you can get the faculty's feedback about developing, using and sustaining an outdoor classroom. On the faculty survey, faculty members will have the opportunity to sign up and volunteer on the Outdoor Classroom Planning Committee.

Your goal is to have one teacher from each grade level and all of the science teachers on the committee, if feasible, to ensure that the outdoor classroom meets the needs of all students and teachers regardless of grade level.

If you do not have enough teachers to volunteer to serve on the planning committee through the faculty survey, then you should recruit other teachers to join the committee. Try to avoid assigning teachers to the committee if possible.

Other Potential Outdoor Classroom Planning Committee Members

In addition to including faculty members on the planning committee, you can also invite other members of your school community to serve on the planning committee including the following:

- ❖ school administrators, staff, and grounds personnel;
- ❖ students including 4-H, Junior Master Gardeners, Future Farmers of America, or other student club members;
- ❖ PTA/PTO members, parent volunteers, or grandparents;
- ❖ your local Alabama Cooperative Extension Agent or local agriculture and natural resource agency personnel; and
- ❖ community groups, Master Gardeners, Master Naturalists and city/county officials.



In a survey of our most active Outdoor Classroom schools (those that used their outdoor classrooms for hands-on activities 20-30 times per year), 80% of them reported to have an active planning committee that meets at least two times in the fall and two times in the spring.

Example Planning Committee Member Responsibilities

Your planning committee will work together as a team to develop and sustain the outdoor classroom. You may have more than one person sharing a particular task, or you may share these responsibilities evenly among the entire committee. Example responsibilities include the following:

- ❖ Take notes and share the meeting notes with the whole committee after the meeting.
- ❖ Maintain communication between the team members via email updates.
- ❖ Create an agenda for upcoming meetings in order to keep the committee focused and moving forward.
- ❖ Document progress with "before" and "after" photos, a scrapbook, and/or video journal.
- ❖ Post updates about the outdoor classroom to the school newsletter, website, Facebook page, and other social media.
- ❖ Maintain an outdoor classroom bulletin board in the school with photos of what plants are growing or blooming in the outdoor classroom and what wildlife is visiting the habitat to encourage teachers to use the outdoor classroom with their students.

- ❖ Research and write grant proposals for materials needed to create and use outdoor learning stations, educational signage, and activity kits.
- ❖ Prepare a “wish list,” and ask parents and local businesses for monetary or in-kind donations.
- ❖ Work with the school bookkeeper to gather invoices, submit Purchase Order requests, collect receipts, and submit payment for items and services related to the outdoor classroom.
- ❖ Coordinate the Maintenance Plan including work days in the outdoor classroom.
- ❖ Write thank-you notes for donations of time, materials, plants, or educational resources.
- ❖ Compile educational resources and activity kits that can be used for outdoor classroom activities.
- ❖ Schedule inservice teacher training workshops or share local outdoor classroom workshop opportunities with your faculty.

Outdoor Classroom Project Leader Tips

Stay organized!

- ❖ Take notes (or ask someone else to take notes) during each meeting to keep the committee organized and on-task.
- ❖ Email the meeting notes within a week of the meeting as a follow up for those who attended and as an update for those who were unable to attend.
- ❖ Send reminders about upcoming meetings including an agenda as a reminder to those who will need to give updates on their projects or tasks.

Delegate, delegate, delegate!

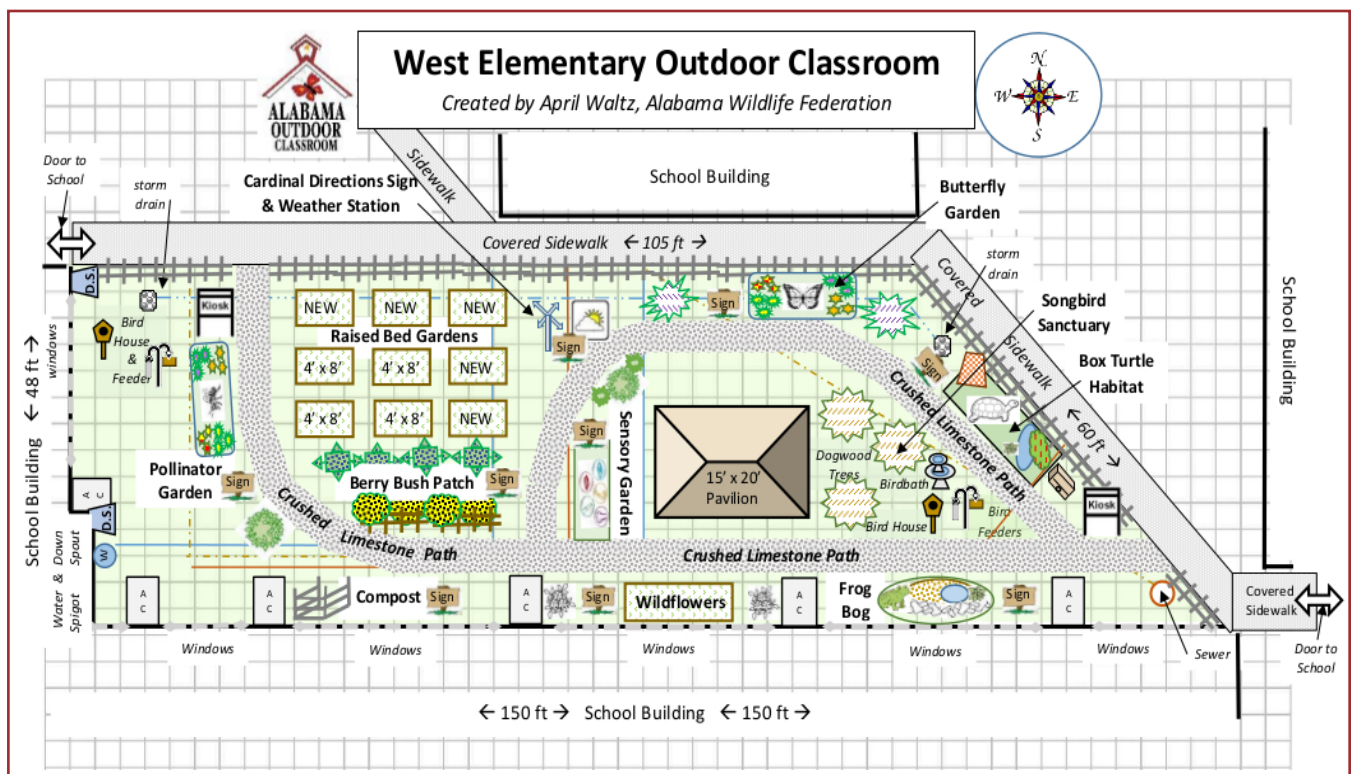
- ❖ Delegate the other outdoor classroom development and maintenance responsibilities to committee members, teachers, students and other volunteers as needed.
- ❖ Divide the tasks into small, finite commitments to help you delegate some of the work, make the projects less overwhelming, and get more people involved.
- ❖ Keep a log of who volunteers to assist with various tasks so that you can easily follow up with them before the next meeting.
- ❖ Review and update your school's outdoor classroom information and photos each year on the Outdoor Classroom Schools Map on AWF's website.
- ❖ Review and update your Master Plan each year with your faculty to create your “To-Do List” for the school year. A link to your Master Plan can be found on your school's outdoor classroom webpage by clicking on your county on AWF's online OC Schools Map and then clicking on your school's name.

Planning Committee Tips...

- ❖ Meet at least four times a year—twice in the fall and twice in the spring—even after certifying your outdoor classroom.
- ❖ Spread the workload by delegating specific tasks to teachers and volunteers who are not serving on the committee. The more people involved, then the more support the project will have, the more it will be used, and the longer it will be sustained.
- ❖ Give volunteers very clear and limited tasks for a specific period of time.
- ❖ Have appointed leaders on your committee with clearly defined oversight responsibilities. For instance, planning committee members can serve as project leaders for specific learning stations.
- ❖ Streamline communication between all planning committee members and volunteers by setting up an email list, and have one person on the planning committee send out monthly updates to everyone on the list.
- ❖ Have one central location (such as an online Google Docs Drive) where copies of all outdoor classroom documents are kept including the master plan, learning station project plans and budgets, site map(s), grant applications, photos, newspaper articles, etc.
- ❖ Review and update your Master Plan Checklist with your planning committee each August to establish your goals and projects for the upcoming year.
- ❖ Annually survey the teachers at the beginning of each new school year to ensure that new teachers have the opportunity to serve on the committee.
- ❖ Give updates at faculty and PTA/PTO meetings so that everyone will be “up-to-date” and “in the loop,” especially at the beginning of each school year since the school will have new teachers and parents who might be interested in getting involved with the outdoor classroom.



A school can enroll in the Alabama Outdoor Classroom (AOC) program at any time during their outdoor classroom development, but we encourage schools to enroll as soon as you have administrative approval and have created your planning committee so that your school can enjoy all of the AOC program benefits. Below are the enrollment and program details.



Outdoor Classroom Consultants work with the schools enrolled in the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program to create a free site map or schematic of what the outdoor classroom could include once all of the learning stations are completed.

Enrollment

Enroll your school, register your planning committee, and pay your one-time enrollment fee on the Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) website.

When the AWF receives your enrollment, we will send you your free Outdoor Classroom Planning Guides and an Outdoor Classroom Consultant will contact you to set up a meeting with you and your planning committee.

Once the school is officially enrolled in the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program (AOC), be sure to notify the faculty and place an announcement in the school's newsletter so that everyone will be informed of your plans and progress.

Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program Benefits

The AOC program partners strive to provide as many benefits and opportunities as possible for enrolled Outdoor Classroom Schools, including the following:

Technical and Organizational Assistance

- ❖ AWF Outdoor Classroom Consultants, Alabama Cooperative

Extension System (ACES) Agents, and trained Master Gardeners provide free technical advice and organizational assistance.

- ❖ AWF's Outdoor Classroom E-newsletter includes important information about grants, workshops, activities, and maintenance tips to help you create, use and sustain your outdoor classroom.
- ❖ Your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant will work with your planning committee to develop a Master Plan with short-term and long-term goals, an outdoor classroom site map that demonstrates where the various learning stations will be located, and a list of materials and estimated budget for each of the learning stations.
- ❖ Your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant will work with your planning committee to help you hold Outdoor Classroom Work Day(s) so that your students, teachers, parents and community volunteers can work side-by-side during a school day to build new outdoor learning stations, plant plants, and/or carry out maintenance tasks.

Educator Workshops

- ❖ AWF Outdoor Classroom Consultants provide free in-service Outdoor Classroom teacher training workshops and professional development.
- ❖ AWF, ACES, and other AOC Partners offer thematic Outdoor Classroom workshops throughout the year that provide tips, advice and activities about a wide variety of topics such as “Birds & Butterflies,” “Citizen Science Activities,” “Gardening,” and other topics.

Grant Opportunities

- ❖ AWF offers competitive, annual Outdoor Classroom grants (when possible) for schools enrolled in the AOC program. Visit the *OC Grants, Funding & Support* section of AWF’s website for details.

Outdoor Classroom Social Media

- ❖ The Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program Facebook page includes posts by OC Consultants and teachers about resources, grants, and activity ideas for schools with outdoor classrooms.

- ❖ Follow the Alabama Outdoor Classroom on Pinterest for ideas about outdoor classroom activities, learning stations, educational signs and more.

Recognition & Certification

- ❖ Once a school completes AOC certification requirements (see Step 10 for certification details), an Outdoor Classroom Consultant will help your school host a Certification Ceremony to celebrate your accomplishments.
- ❖ AOC certification benefits include a personalized certificate, an Alabama Outdoor Classroom sign, a full set of the APTV *Discovering Alabama* DVDs, and a National Wildlife Federation Schoolyard Habitats® certification (optional).
- ❖ Upon enrollment, your school will be added to the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Schools Map on AWF’s website which will link to a webpage for your outdoor classroom.

Discovering Alabama



Dr. Doug Phillips provides enormous leadership and support for conservation education programs in Alabama including the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program.

The *Discovering Alabama* tv series is an Alabama Public Television program that explores Alabama’s natural resources and biodiversity and the connections between our natural and cultural heritage, which makes learning locally relevant for students who watch it.

Watch a *Discovering Alabama* DVD with your students to introduce them to Alabama’s rich natural history and biodiversity, and use the free Teacher’s Guides that contain activities and lessons for each specific episode to tie the program to your course of study objectives.

Dr. Doug Phillips, host of the show, donates a copy of a *Discovering Alabama* DVD along with the accompanying Teacher Guide to each school as they enroll in the AOC program, and he later donates the entire *Discovering Alabama* DVD series to schools when they certify their outdoor classroom through the AOC program.

For more information and to download free *Discovering Alabama* Teacher’s Guides, visit www.discoveringalabama.org.



West Morgan Elementary students love to watch the free *Discovering Alabama* DVDs that the school received upon completing AOC certification.



After your outdoor classroom planning committee is established and you have enrolled in the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program, your next step is to **evaluate your campus**. The question is not whether the land on your campus has value for education and wildlife, but how your committee chooses to use the campus as an educational tool and wildlife habitat. Below are the steps you and your planning committee should take in order to accurately and efficiently evaluate your campus.

School Campus Map

Get a copy of the school campus map from the administrator or school system office that you can easily edit and on which you can include your site evaluation notes. The map should include the following:

- ❖ Buildings, sidewalks, parking lots, athletic fields, playgrounds, and retention ponds;
- ❖ Utility lines such as gas, electricity, water, sewer, phone, cable, drainage, or sprinklers;
- ❖ Paved roads, walkways and traffic patterns including cars, bikes, pedestrians, and delivery vehicles;
- ❖ Neighboring properties or roads; and
- ❖ Future building sites that need to be avoided.

Site Evaluation

Set up a meeting with your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant and your planning committee to evaluate your campus. This should be scheduled after organizing your planning committee and enrolling in the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program. Also, invite your local Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) Agent to assist with the evaluation.

Provide copies of the Site Evaluation Checklist (*available in the OC Planning Guide & Checklists section of the Alabama Wildlife Federation's website*) for all planning committee members to use during the site evaluation. Note the following on your **Site Evaluation Checklist**:

- ☐ **Site Availability** – Do not consider sites where future construction projects such as new buildings, parking lots, playgrounds or portables are planned.
- ☐ **Travel Time** – Choose a site that is close to the school building and easily accessible so that teachers can limit travel time to 5-minutes or less and maximize activity time; otherwise, the teachers will not use the outdoor classroom for educational purposes due to their hectic schedules.
- ☐ **Accessibility to ALL Students** – Make sure that your outdoor classroom site is accessible to all students, including your students with disabilities or special needs (such as wheelchair access).
- ☐ **Already Existing Features** – Sometimes you can develop your outdoor classroom area(s) around features that already exist on your campus, which will help you save time and money, but these need to be in an area that is easily accessible with a quick travel time. Useful pre-existing features could include



Contact your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant to assist you with your school's site evaluation.

the following:

- ❖ Classroom Seating such as a gazebo, pavilion, amphitheater, outdoor stage or benches
 - ❖ Raised Bed Gardens such as vegetable/herb gardens, butterfly gardens, or other themed gardens
 - ❖ Aquatic Study Areas such as a fish pond, frog pond, wetland, stream, or bog garden
 - ❖ Natural Areas such as a forest or meadow
 - ❖ Nature Trail such as a path through the woods.
- ☐ **Site Size** – Take measurements of the potential site(s) with your students. Keep in mind that a half-acre courtyard area is easier to maintain than an acre or more of land/forest near the school...smaller can be better.
 - ☐ **Directional Orientation** – Note the directional orientation (north, south, east and west) on your map to help determine which areas will receive the most sun and wind exposure.
 - ☐ **Sun Exposure** – Note how much sun exposure your potential outdoor classroom site(s) receive at different times of day and during different times of the year to help determine which species of plants to include. Southern or western exposures tend to receive the most sunlight and afternoon heat, whereas northern or northeastern exposures receive the least. Also, think about how the angle of the sun changes due to the tilt of the Earth during different seasons of the year.
 - ☐ **Erosion or Drainage Problems** – Avoid areas with erosion or drainage problems unless it is an area where the problem can be remediated by installing French drains, a rain garden, plants and/or by other means.

- ❑ **Water Sources** – Identify natural water sources like streams, wetlands or ponds that provide suitable areas for hands-on aquatic study activities with students. Also, look for spigots, downspouts, rain barrels, and sprinklers that can be used to water your plants.
- ❑ **Wildlife Habitat** – Assess the habitat (food, water, shelter & places to raise young) available for backyard wildlife. *See the Schoolyard Wildlife Habitat Tips on page 21 and on the AWF's website.*
- ❑ **Electricity Sources** – Look for electrical outlets in case you need access to electricity for an activity or a learning station (such as the pump on a backyard pond).
- ❑ **Soil Quality & Soil Type** – Contact your county Extension office or garden supply center for information and tools on how to conduct a soil test to help you determine your soil type and the species of plants and trees that can grow in your outdoor classroom site.
- ❑ **Watershed** – Map the watershed around your school including where run-off from buildings and paved areas collect and which areas drain quickly or are very dry. Research the rivers and watersheds near you using the Auburn University Water Resources Center website at <http://aaes.auburn.edu/wrc/resource/rivers-of-alabama/>.
- ❑ **Topography** – Note the elevation and slope. For example, hills and rises may provide a good location for an amphitheater, but may not be easily accessible; whereas, low areas may collect water and remain “mucky,” making them ideal for an artificial wetland or rain garden. When building a nature trail on a slope, consider creating a trail that winds left and right with switchbacks to minimize the slope for wheelchairs and to reduce potential erosion.
- ❑ **Geology** – Research the geological characteristics found in your county; and, if possible, collect and identify different types of rocks around your school grounds.
- ❑ **Wind Direction** – If needed, plant evergreens to help protect your outdoor classroom area from potentially high winds, keeping in mind that the weather systems typically travel from west to east across Alabama.
- ❑ **Foot Traffic** – Note any areas that contain foot paths utilized by students, teachers, and the community, and consider formalizing the path with a walkway to direct the traffic through the outdoor classroom site without disturbing it.
- ❑ **Safety Hazards** – Check for any nearby hazards or safety concerns such as poison ivy, wasp nests, or busy streets around your outdoor classroom.
- ❑ **Litter & Vandalism Issues** – Identify any potential sources for litter or vandalism around your outdoor classroom site.

(Review the Vandalism Reduction Tips on page 22 and on AWF's website.)

- ❑ **Low Maintenance** – Choose and design your outdoor classroom with minimal maintenance needs in mind. Remember, planting native plants and trees will reduce your watering responsibilities.
- ❑ **Non-native, Invasive Plants** – If possible, identify and remove all non-native, invasive plants and replace them with natives. *(Contact your local Alabama Cooperative Extension System office for free assistance with the identification of non-native plants.)*
- ❑ **Neighbors** – Note the land use on adjacent properties. Neighbors who also manage their property for wildlife can be beneficial, whereas businesses and streets may create danger zones and/or loud noise. Consider planting a line of evergreens such as American or yaupon hollies to create a natural fence-line if needed.

Choose your Outdoor Classroom Site(s)

After reviewing your potential outdoor classroom sites, your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant will help you determine which site(s) would provide the best outdoor classroom location. Try to choose one central location for your outdoor classroom site instead of having the outdoor learning stations spread out over your campus. After filling out your Site Evaluation Form, mark the location of the potential outdoor classroom site(s) you hope to develop on your campus map.

Site Approval Form

Once an outdoor classroom site is chosen, your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant will submit a Site Approval Form and Google Earth map of the site. These must be reviewed and signed by your principal and your school system's Buildings and Maintenance Supervisor to verify where any underground hazards or utility lines are located so the utilities can be marked on the outdoor classroom schematic and avoided during the construction phase.



Amy Clark

You do not have to locate your outdoor classroom near the wildlife habitat that is already on your campus. The AWF can help your school develop habitat to attract backyard wildlife.

After you have chosen the site for your outdoor classroom, you should also evaluate the wildlife habitat in the outdoor classroom area to determine what habitat resources are already present and what resources could be easily added to enhance the habitat. Below are some suggestions on how to evaluate your school's wildlife habitat.

Wildlife Habitat Tips

An outdoor classroom created and certified through the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program must provide habitat for local backyard wildlife, including the following:

☐ Food

Everyone needs to eat! Planting native forbs, shrubs, and trees is the easiest (and cheapest) way to provide the foliage, nectar, pollen, and mast (seeds, berries, acorns and nuts) that many species of wildlife require to survive and thrive. The ideal wildlife management plan uses locally native vegetation to meet the year-round needs of wildlife.

☐ Water

Wildlife needs sources of clean water for many purposes including drinking, bathing, and reproduction. Water sources may include natural features such as ponds, streams, or wetlands. Many species including salamanders, frogs, toads, and insects (like dragonflies) begin life in water and are unlikely to prosper in your outdoor classroom without a safe, healthy water environment.

☐ Cover

Just as people need the shelter of a house, wildlife require protective cover to remain safe from people, predators, and inclement weather. The easiest way to provide cover for terrestrial wildlife is by using native vegetation, both dead and alive. Plants ranging in size and density from ground cover to tall, mature trees, including both evergreen and deciduous plants, provides birds and other wildlife with the appropriate cover for feeding, hiding, mating and reproductive activities. Densely branched shrubs, thickets, and brush piles provide great hiding places within their bushy leaves and thorns, while other wildlife may use tree cavities in snags (dead trees), leaf litter, fallen limbs, rotting logs, and rock piles as cover.

☐ Places to Raise Young

Many places for cover can double as a sheltered place where wildlife can raise their young away from predators and inclement weather. For example, many butterflies use wildflower meadows for protection from wind and as "host plants" to lay their eggs. A brush pile can provide cover for rabbits and their young. However, some wildlife require an alternative to the cover they use during non-reproductive times such as cavity nesting birds that require snags with natural cavities for nesting or frogs that need a pond to raise their young (tadpoles).



A yaupon or American holly is an evergreen bush that provides berries in the winter, nesting sites for birds in the spring, and year-round cover from inclement weather and predators. The holly in this photo was home to a robin's nest.

Habitat Assessment

Once your outdoor classroom site is chosen, you need to work with your students to determine what habitat already exists and what habitat resources you want to add. To do this, use the Schoolyard Wildlife Habitat Tips and habitat assessment activities on the Alabama Wildlife Federation website.

Below are basic steps you will need to take to conduct your habitat assessment:

- ☐ **Determine** which backyard wildlife species are native to your area.
- ☐ **Identify** which of those species you would like to attract to your schoolyard habitat.
- ☐ **Research** the habitat needs of the species you chose.
- ☐ **Assess** whether or not your outdoor classroom already includes those habitat resources.
- ☐ If the outdoor classroom lacks specific resources, **create** a plan for how you will add those resources to the habitat.

Below are resources that your students can use for the habitat assessment:

- ❖ Watchable Wildlife section of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources website
- ❖ *National Audubon Society Regional Guide to the Southeastern States*
- ❖ *Alabama Wildlife* book series by Ralph Mirarchi

If you need on-site assistance, contact your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant.

Proven Tips to Reduce Vandalism

- ❑ Involve students in the design, development, use and maintenance of the outdoor classroom so that they will take ownership in the project and want to protect it.
- ❑ If possible, try to have all of your outdoor classroom learning stations in one central area (like a courtyard) instead of spreading them out around the campus so that you can keep an eye on it more easily.
- ❑ Keep your outdoor classroom clean and free of litter to reduce the possibility of future littering. Ask the custodians if you can keep a garbage can in the outdoor classroom area that they will empty daily or weekly.
- ❑ Consider the location of your outdoor classroom and how easily it can be monitored as most vandalized areas are also the most secluded. Make sure that the area has appropriate lighting since vandals are less likely to strike in a well-lit area.
- ❑ Properly located entrances, exits, fencing, and landscaping can direct both foot and automobile traffic to discourage crime.
- ❑ Signs can be great deterrents. Post an “Outdoor Classroom Rules” sign near the entrance to the outdoor classroom so that everyone will know what rules to follow and a “For School Use Only” sign to discourage unwanted visitors if needed.
- ❑ Incorporate an educational sign beside each outdoor learning station to explain the purpose of the learning station, and utilize plant identification signs to identify specific plants and explain how these plants provide food and shelter for wildlife.
- ❑ Fence the entire outdoor classroom area if possible—not necessarily to deter entrance into the outdoor classroom area, but rather to delineate the area as “special” so that students, faculty and community members know they are entering an area that should be treated with respect.
- ❑ If your outdoor classroom area is fenced, consider locking the fence with a combination lock and giving the combination to the faculty members. If you use a key lock, place the key in a convenient location that is easily accessible to all teachers - not in another teacher’s room.
- ❑ Involve the community and make your neighbors aware of your outdoor classroom. The more eyes and ears that you have monitoring your outdoor classroom the better.
- ❑ Educate your students, faculty, parents and school volunteers about the importance of creating wildlife habitat for the school and the community. Hold an outdoor classroom “Open House,” conduct a “bug count,” offer “habitat tours,” host “celebrations,” and organize “Clean Up Days.”
- ❑ Make sure everyone understands that vandalism is a crime and that crime and that vandalism will be reported to the police.
- ❑ If vandalized, clean up immediately, report it to the police, and then continue to counsel and educate the students about the importance of your schoolyard wildlife habitat and outdoor classroom.



Outdoor Classroom Rules Signs (left pic) and educational signs that explain the purpose of the learning stations (right pic) help teachers, students and parents better understand the purpose of the schoolyard wildlife habitat and outdoor classroom.



Now that you have a clear understanding of where you would like to create your outdoor classroom site, you can now **develop your master plan** that includes the committee's short-term and long-term goals, faculty survey results, list of prioritized projects, and estimated budgets and timelines for each project. In addition, your master plan should include a site map of your outdoor classroom that demonstrates where the various learning stations will be located once the outdoor classroom is completed.



Teachers who help maintain the outdoor classroom with their students are more likely to use the outdoor classroom as an educational tool.

Master Plan Details

Your outdoor classroom planning committee should work together to create a detailed master plan using the free online Master Plan Checklist on the Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) website which includes the following information:

☐ Long-term Goals

Discuss the long-term goals for your outdoor classroom before you begin to develop any learning stations to help your planning committee prioritize your projects and guide your plans for years to come.

Common long-term goals include the following:

- ❖ Meet Alabama Department of Education course of study objectives
- ❖ Utilize Science, Technology, Engineering, Art & Math (STEM/STEAM) activities
- ❖ Use hands-on, outdoor activities
- ❖ Provide inquiry-based learning opportunities
- ❖ Increase standardized test scores
- ❖ Teach about conservation
- ❖ Get students outdoors
- ❖ Make learning fun
- ❖ Develop wildlife habitat

If you wish to receive support through the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program, then your long-term goals must include providing hands-on, outdoor activities and developing a schoolyard wildlife habitat. *For outdoor activity ideas and Schoolyard Habitat Tips, visit AWF's website.*

☐ Purpose Statement

Write your purpose statement in a concise message that can be posted in your outdoor classroom and used on grant applications to educate others about why your school wants to develop, use and sustain an outdoor classroom.

☐ Current & Proposed Outdoor Learning Stations

Review the list of preferred outdoor learning stations in your school's faculty survey results with your outdoor classroom planning committee, and create a list of the learning stations you would like to include in the completed outdoor classroom site. These are the learning stations that will be included on the Outdoor Classroom Site Map created by your local Outdoor Classroom (OC) Consultant. *See the "Tips for Choosing your Outdoor Learning Stations" textbox on the following page.*

❑ Short-term Goals

Meet at the beginning of each school year to discuss your planning committee's short-term goals as these will change from year to year as you develop, use and maintain your outdoor classroom.

Example short-term goals include the following:

- ❖ Begin developing our outdoor classroom
- ❖ Expand our current outdoor classroom
- ❖ Increase the number of classes utilizing the outdoor classroom as an educational tool
- ❖ Increase student participation in the maintenance of the outdoor classroom
- ❖ Expand the learning opportunities in our outdoor classroom
- ❖ Increase community involvement in the outdoor classroom
- ❖ Provide service-learning opportunities for students
- ❖ Increase the number and diversity of wildlife visiting the outdoor classroom

❑ Prioritized Projects

Your prioritized projects will change from year to year depending on what you hope to accomplish during the school year. These projects should help you accomplish your short-term and long-term goals, address any faculty needs expressed in the Faculty Survey, and include projects that need to be completed from the previous year. Remember, be careful not to take on too much!

Example outdoor classroom projects include the following:

- ❖ Learning Stations (ex/ pitcher plant bog garden or songbird sanctuary)
- ❖ Construction Projects (ex/ benches or educational signage)
- ❖ Activity Kits (ex/ educational resources such as field guides and magnifying loupes)
- ❖ Educational Signage (ex/ sign with info about carnivorous pitcher plants or outdoor classroom rules sign)
- ❖ Communication Projects (ex/ bulletin board or newsletter articles)
- ❖ Fundraising (ex/ grants or fundraisers)
- ❖ Maintenance (ex/ OC Work Day or Learning Station Adoption Program)
- ❖ Special Events (ex/ OC Activities Day or OC Certification Ceremony)

❑ Project Coordinators, Budgets & Timelines

For each of your projects, be sure to discuss who will coordinate each project (from your planning committee or faculty), what the estimated cost of each project is (if any), and when each project will be completed.

Example "project plans" that include a list of materials needed and estimated budgets for various learning stations, construction projects, activity kits, and educational signage can be found on the AWF's website. In addition, you can find a list of grant opportunities, maintenance tips, and planning materials for events like an Outdoor Classroom Work Day on AWF's website as well.

Outdoor Learning Station Ideas

- ❖ **TIP #1:** Use the internet to review outdoor learning station ideas on AWF's website, Pinterest (look at the Alabama Outdoor Classroom's Pinterest boards), and other outdoor education websites.
- ❖ **TIP #2:** Review the Faculty Survey results to find out which types of learning stations the faculty supports.
- ❖ **TIP #3:** Attend Alabama Outdoor Classroom (AOC) educator workshops to learn about potential learning stations and how they can be used as educational tools. *Visit AWF's website for workshop dates and locations.*
- ❖ **TIP #4:** Visit other schools enrolled in the AOC Program to find out what types of learning stations they included in their site. Don't forget your camera and a notebook so that you can take pictures and notes to share with the rest of your planning committee. *Visit the AOC Schools Map on AWF's website for OC schools' contact information.*
- ❖ **TIP #5:** Choose effective and sustainable learning stations that help teach Alabama Department of Education course of study objectives while also piquing student's interest and curiosity.



This example songbird habitat includes native berry-producing bushes for food and cover, birdfeeders, a bird bath for water, and nesting boxes.

☐ Outdoor Classroom Partners & Sponsors

List the names and contact information for your local OC Consultant, volunteers, Master Gardeners, businesses and/or agencies along with an explanation about the type of support and assistance they provide for your school and your outdoor classroom.

Annual Tasks Checklist

The following tasks should be included in your committee's "To-Do List" each year to help you and your outdoor classroom planning committee sustain your outdoor classroom from year to year:

☐ Outdoor Classroom Webpage

Update your school's outdoor classroom (OC) webpage photos and information including your planning committee's email addresses so that everyone will receive the Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) Outdoor Classroom E-newsletter which includes activity ideas, grant tips and workshop opportunities. To review and update your school's OC webpage, visit the interactive Alabama Outdoor Classroom Schools Map on AWF's website.

☐ Wildlife Habitat Assessment

Assess the wildlife habitat resources (food, water, shelter & places to raise young) available in your outdoor classroom using the tips and activities found on page 21 of the Outdoor Classroom Planning Guide and in the Schoolyard Wildlife Habitat Tips section of the AWF website.

☐ Outdoor Classroom Site Map

Contact your local Outdoor Classroom (OC) Consultant so s/he can create a map showing where the different learning stations will be located in the outdoor classroom once it is completed, so that you can see how the learning stations fit together to create your school's outdoor classroom site.

Before the OC Consultant begins the layout of your outdoor classroom, s/he will email you a Site Approval Form, which must be signed by your principal and your school system's Buildings and Maintenance Supervisor. Once you provide the signed Site Approval Form, the map of your school's utility lines in the outdoor classroom area, and a list



Keeping key people like the principal, faculty, and maintenance staff informed and involved are vital to the success and sustainability of your outdoor classroom.

of your planning committee's outdoor learning station preferences, your OC Consultant will create the outdoor classroom site map.

Each year, review your school's outdoor classroom site map(s), and work with your OC Consultant to update the site map(s) if needed.

☐ Maintenance Plan

Utilize the Outdoor Classroom Maintenance Tips on AWF's website to help establish an effective, sustainable maintenance plan for the year. Each year, review your Maintenance Plan from the previous school year and summer, and discuss what worked and what did not.

Encourage teacher and student participation in the maintenance by creating an "Outdoor Learning Station Adoption Program," and by utilizing student clubs for weekly maintenance needs such as picking up litter or watering plants. Teachers who help maintain the outdoor classroom with their students are more likely to use the outdoor classroom as an educational tool.

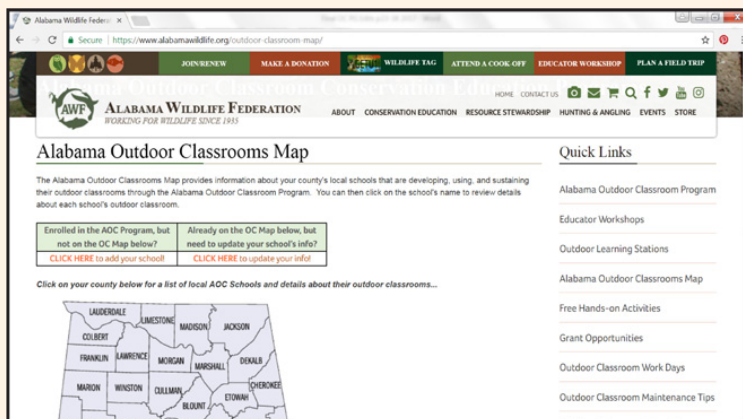
☐ Faculty Update

Provide an update about the outdoor classroom to the faculty at the beginning of each semester and throughout the year on an as-needed basis. Keeping key people like the principal, faculty, and maintenance staff informed and involved are vital to the success and sustainability of your outdoor classroom.

Master Plan Tips...

Your master plan will help you stay organized and focused, and will help you create a sustainable outdoor classroom site that is an effective educational tool.

- ❖ Fill out the online Master Plan Checklist for your school on the Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) website. Once you click “Submit,” a link to your Master Plan will then be located on your school’s outdoor classroom webpage on AWF’s website.
- ❖ Review and update your online Master Plan Checklist each August to help you create a comprehensive “game plan” for the upcoming year.
- ❖ Create a master plan that can be implemented in phases from year to year with realistic timelines.
- ❖ Gradually introduce more outdoor classroom learning stations and projects at a rate that equals the support your planning committee receives.
- ❖ Be flexible as you carry out the projects in your master plan since funding sources and plans can change.
- ❖ Be patient and allow excitement and interest to grow as teachers begin to see the possibilities of what their outdoor classroom could look like and how it can be used as an educational tool.
- ❖ Make sure that all faculty members, even those not serving on the outdoor classroom planning committee, know your long-term and short-term goals and understand the purpose of your outdoor classroom.
- ❖ Have a long-term maintenance plan that includes what types of maintenance will be required for each learning station during each month or season, including summertime.
- ❖ Make sure that you have the future time, money and resources to maintain the outdoor classroom as you have designed it.
- ❖ Keep copies of your master plan, project plans, and receipts in an outdoor classroom binder for future reference.
- ❖ Remember—Keep It Simple and Have Fun!



To view your school’s online Master Plan, visit AWF’s OC schools map, click on your county and then click on your school’s name. The link to your Master Plan will be on your school’s outdoor classroom webpage once you have filled out the online Master Plan Checklist.

Faculty Survey

Contact your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant so s/he can set up a free online survey for your faculty at the beginning of each school year. The faculty survey will help you gather feedback such as which learning stations the teachers would/do use the most, what resources they may need to use the outdoor classroom as an educational tool, and who would like to serve on the planning committee.

Parent Update

Present an update about the outdoor classroom to the PTA/PTO each school year. Parents can provide valuable volunteer and financial support. Keep them involved!



Parents can provide valuable volunteer and financial support. Keep them involved!



Now that you have your master plan completed, it is time to **find funding and support** such as volunteers, monetary and in-kind donations, and grants to help you with the development, use and maintenance of your outdoor classroom. Below are some tips to keep in mind as you begin this process.



Recognize your sponsors, partners and volunteers on signs, in school newsletters, and at the end of all of your Outdoor Classroom Work Days so that they know you appreciate their support.

Tips on how to “Spread the Word”

Continuously publicize your outdoor classroom plans and efforts with your students, faculty, staff, parents, and community. The more you spread the word, the easier it will be to find funding and support.

- ❑ **Outdoor Classroom Brochure** – Have students create a basic brochure that explains the goals of your outdoor classroom including a few details about specific learning stations and/or activities.
- ❑ **Press Releases** – Ask students to write a standard press release about the purpose and status of your outdoor classroom including how it is used for hands-on, outdoor activities. *(You can use the example Press Release on AWF’s website in the OC Planning Guide & Checklists section.)*
- ❑ **Local Newspapers** – Submit a press release to local newspapers before each outdoor classroom event and as you complete different phases of your outdoor classroom development. Be sure to include photographs with captions explaining the photos and identifying the people in the photos.
- ❑ **Local TV Stations** – Contact your local television stations to invite them to attend events, especially if you are holding a special “work day” or ceremony. If they are unable to attend, send them a press release with photos from the event so they can post the story on their website.
- ❑ **PTA/PTO Newsletter** – Submit regular outdoor classroom updates including photos of students participating in hands-on activities to the PTA/PTO newsletter. Advertise your “outdoor classroom wish list” so that parents will know what materials you need for outdoor classroom construction or activities. Also, publicize your “work days” encouraging parent participation.
- ❑ **School Newsletter** – Work with students and planning committee members to maintain an Outdoor Classroom column in the school’s newspaper including outdoor classroom updates, conservation education activities, signs of wildlife found in the outdoor classroom, photos of students using/maintaining the outdoor classroom, photos of volunteers, and/or photos of wildlife using the schoolyard wildlife habitat.
- ❑ **School Website** – Maintain a webpage on your school’s website that includes outdoor classroom photos and updates along with a thank-you to your local partners and supporters.
- ❑ **Billboards/Marquees** – Advertise your work days and your outdoor classroom wish list on the school’s billboards or marquees to help publicize your outdoor classroom needs to the local community.
- ❑ **Bulletin Boards** – Put a bulletin board near the entrance of the outdoor classroom or by the school’s entrance to update visitors about the outdoor classroom and related topics and activities.
- ❑ **Faculty Meetings** – Plan to give a two minute update at each faculty meeting to make sure that the faculty is kept “in the loop.”
- ❑ **School System Meetings** – Keep your school administrators and the school system’s Buildings and Maintenance Supervisor informed of your outdoor classroom progress.

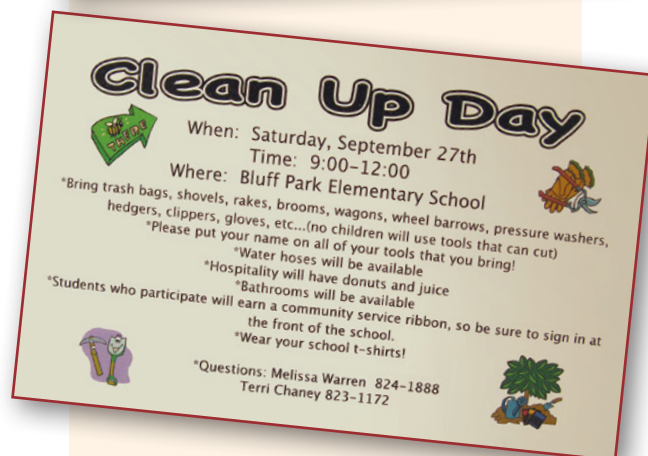
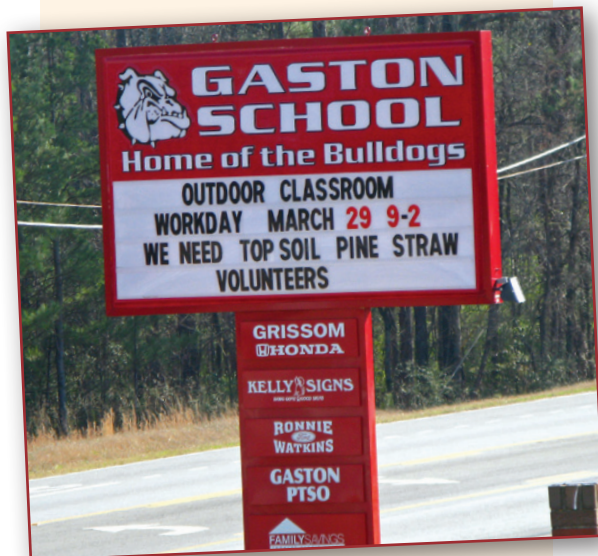
- ❑ **School Open House** – Include a tour of the outdoor classroom during any school “Open House” event so that parents are aware of how your school provides hands-on, outdoor learning opportunities.
- ❑ **Parent-Teacher Conferences & Meetings** – Be sure to discuss the outdoor classroom face-to-face with parents, including specific activities that you are using with the students in conjunction with the outdoor classroom, to help explain how the outdoor classroom is used as an educational tool and to garner parents’ support.
- ❑ **Sponsor Sign** – Post a sign in or near the outdoor classroom site that recognizes your volunteers, donors, sponsors, and partners either by name or by using logos.
- ❑ **Certification Signs** – Post your official Alabama Outdoor Classroom certification sign in or near the outdoor classroom along with your National Wildlife Federation Schoolyard Habitat® sign once you are certified to remind your faculty, students and parents what your school has accomplished.
- ❑ **Outdoor Festival** – Hold an annual “Outdoor Festival” in your school’s outdoor classroom area, and invite the classes to tour the outdoor classroom area and participate in a structured outdoor classroom activity. This will excite the students, and help fellow teachers understand how to use the outdoor classroom for hands-on learning opportunities. *(Contact your local OC Consultant so s/he can help you organize the event.)*

Potential Sources for Funding & Support

Continuously publicize your outdoor classroom plans and efforts with your students, faculty, staff, parents, and community. The more you spread the word, the easier it will be to find funding and support.

- ❑ **Visit the Outdoor Classroom Grants, Funding and Support** webpage on the Alabama Wildlife Federation’s (AWF) website for funding opportunities such as upcoming grants.
- ❑ **Contact local businesses** such as plant nurseries or lawn & garden centers about donations or discounts on their plants and products.
- ❑ **Ask your local botanical gardens and/or Master Gardeners** if they have extra plants that they could donate to your school.
- ❑ **Ask the PTA/PTO** to provide a line item in their budget for annual maintenance to increase the sustainability of the outdoor classroom from year to year.
- ❑ **Ask your local “Partner-in-Education,”** a business who has adopted your school and promised to support your school’s projects, to provide volunteers and financial support for the outdoor classroom.
- ❑ **Contact your local Alabama Cooperative Extension System office** to ask if any 4-H Agents or Master Gardeners would be able to provide hands-on, nature-based activities or expertise during on Outdoor Classroom Day.

Let your faculty, parents and community know about your Outdoor Classroom!



- ❑ **Set up a DonorsChoose.org project** for your outdoor classroom or a specific learning station project so that people can donate funds directly to the outdoor classroom projects.

Solicitation Tips

- ❑ **Check with your school administrator** to find out what the school's solicitation policies are before you start contacting businesses and potential donors.
- ❑ **Create a standard solicitation letter** on school letterhead that can be used by anyone to easily explain your project(s) and ask for donations. *(You can use the example Solicitation Letter on AWF's website on the OC Grants, Funding & Support webpage.)*
- ❑ **Start looking for funding and support** at the local level as donors and volunteers are more likely to support projects in their own backyards than in other counties or states.
- ❑ **Avoid asking one business or foundation** for all of your needed materials or funds as businesses and foundations like to be involved with projects that are supported by the community.
- ❑ **Personally visit each person or business** that is a possible funding source, and invite a young person involved in the project to assist with your "ask."
- ❑ **Let a potential donor know up front** what kind of publicity you can provide in return for their support such as listing their support in the school's newsletter, on a sign in the outdoor classroom, or as a message on the school's marquee.



- ❑ **Share your master plan and outdoor classroom site map** with potential donors so they can have a clear understanding of how the outdoor classroom benefits the students and community.
- ❑ **Provide a specific list of materials** needed so that potential donors, including parents, will see exactly what their money is supporting.
- ❑ **Be flexible with your "asks"** as some businesses will donate materials, labor or equipment before they will provide funds.
- ❑ **Send thank you notes promptly**, and include photos if possible.
- ❑ **Incorporate fundraising activities** into each year's short-term plans by holding annual fundraisers such as bake sales, plant sales, Earth Day tee shirt sales, a fish fry, run/walk race, silent auction, raffle, car wash, banquet, concert, carnival, or a birding festival.
- ❑ **Be sure that your fundraising event complies** with applicable state, federal and school regulations governing fund raising activities.
- ❑ **Keep copies of your grant applications**, so that you can copy and paste information from one grant application into another.
- ❑ **Keep copies of fundraising letters** and donors' contact information for future reference.
- ❑ **Review the grant writing tips** on the OC Grants, Funding & Support webpage on AWF's website.



Master Gardeners provide lots of wonderful FREE advice and technical support for schools enrolled in the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program. Contact your county Extension office to invite local Master Gardeners to serve on your planning committee and to help oversee garden projects.



Some planning committee members may want to jump directly into building the outdoor classroom as your first step without doing much in the way of planning, but we highly recommend that you follow the important planning suggestions in Steps 1-6 so that your outdoor classroom is effective as an educational tool and sustainable for years to come. After you have completed your master plan and you have obtained the necessary funding and support, you can now enjoy getting your hands dirty as you **construct your outdoor classroom**. Below are tips to help you with the construction process.

Construction Tips

Below are tips to consider once you are ready to begin constructing your outdoor learning stations and other components (like benches and educational kiosks).

- ❑ **Use the construction instructions** in the Outdoor Learning Station project plans found on the Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) website, and then modify them to fit your school's needs.
- ❑ **Consider starting with a small and easy project** such as a 4 foot by 6 foot raised bed veggie garden to help get more teachers interested in helping with future outdoor classroom projects.
- ❑ When constructing large outdoor classroom projects such as a backyard pond or pavilion, **ask the Central Office for approval** to make sure that the project meets all construction codes and that it will not interfere with current utility lines or future building plans.
- ❑ **Utilize durable materials and native plants** when building learning stations and components to help keep maintenance at a minimum.
- ❑ **Be flexible** whenever you have to make adjustments in your construction plans, take your time, don't get discouraged, and proceed as you see fit.

Outdoor Classroom (OC) Work Day Tips

Contact your local OC Consultant to help you organize an OC Work Day when students, teachers, parents and community volunteers can work side-by-side to help build, plant, and maintain outdoor learning stations and related components in your outdoor classroom. Your OC Consultant can also attend the event to provide technical support and help supervise the projects. Below are tips to help make your OC Work Day a success:

- ❑ **Game Plan:** Use the planning checklist and materials on the OC Work Day webpage of the AWF website to help you plan your event.
- ❑ **Event Date:** Hold your OC Work Day on a school day to involve students in the construction of the outdoor classroom



Involve students in all aspects of your OC Work Days if possible.

projects so that they will feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for the outdoor classroom, and check your school calendar to avoid scheduling conflicts.

- ❑ **Rain Date:** Be sure to set a "rain date" for the day after the event date in case your original OC Day date gets rained out.
- ❑ **Pre-OC Day Activities:** If you haven't taken students outside to the outdoor classroom area yet, be sure to take them out for activities before the OC Work Day. A fun, free activity to do is "Evidence of Wildlife" (*found on AWF's website*) so students can study how the biodiversity increases on the school grounds after adding wildlife habitat stations in the outdoor classroom site.
- ❑ **Project List:** Create a list of the tasks and projects that you plan to work on during the OC Work Day.
- ❑ **Digging & Utilities Approval Form:** Ask your school system's Buildings and Maintenance Supervisor to spray paint the locations of the utility lines a day or two before the construction day so that those lines can be avoided when digging.
- ❑ **Class Participation:** Although the goal is to include all students, due to limited space you should only plan for four to six students to work together at one time on each project so that none of the students are left without a task. Thus, if you have 6

different projects that day, you could use approximately 24 to 36 students during each time slot.

- ❑ **Class Rotation Schedule:** Create a schedule that gives teachers a specific time to arrive in the outdoor classroom with their students, rotates classes every 30-45 minutes, and allows 5 minutes of transition time as one group leaves and another group arrives.
- ❑ **Student Consent Form:** Send a consent form to parents and guardians at least two weeks prior to the event to get permission for photos of the students to be taken during the event and to let parents know that students must wear appropriate outdoor clothes and closed-toe shoes to participate to keep students safe.
- ❑ **Volunteers:** Invite parents, grandparents, Master Gardeners and other community volunteers to help with construction projects.
- ❑ **Volunteers & Support Needed Form:** Send this form to parents and guardians at least two weeks prior to the event to allow parents to sign up for specific time slots and to donate specific materials needed for the learning stations being constructed that day.
- ❑ **Volunteer Schedule:** Schedule at least 2-3 volunteers for each project during each timeslot, with volunteer shifts beginning at 7:30 am to help with setting up and ending around 3:30 pm to help with clean up.
- ❑ **Volunteer Log:** Keep a list of your volunteers' names, contact information, and the number of hours donated by each volunteer, so that you can send them thank you notes and invite them to future work day events. *(Utilize the OC Volunteer Log in the OC Day planning materials on AWF's website.)*
- ❑ **Volunteer Supplies:** Remind volunteers to wear appropriate clothes and closed-toe shoes for working outdoors, and to bring hats, gloves, sunscreen, extra water, shovels, wheel borrows, and power drills (if needed).
- ❑ **Volunteer Tent:** Set up a shade tent and ask the PTA/PTO to provide drinks and snacks under the tent. If possible, provide lunch for volunteers who stay the whole day.
- ❑ **OC Work Day Supplies:** Organize all of your supplies the day before the event including the following:
 - ❖ All of the materials and plants needed to complete all of the projects and learning stations that day
 - ❖ 30 durable 1-gallon milk jugs (cut tops off but leave handles on) for students to transport materials such as crushed limestone, mulch, or soil
 - ❖ 2 strong/sturdy wheel borrows for each learning station or project;
 - ❖ 6 shovels for students at each learning station or project area that requires digging;
 - ❖ 2 extension cords for drills, saws, or other construction equipment;
 - ❖ 2 cameras to record the progress made during the OC Day along with "before" and "after" photos;
 - ❖ 2 hoses for filling the pond, filling the bog, or watering trees, bushes and flowers; and
 - ❖ 2 large garbage cans for trash and debris.
- ❑ **Safety Protocol:** Review how to properly use tools such as shovels or hammers before allowing the students to use them, and provide safety goggles when needed.
- ❑ **Press Release:** Send a press release to your local tv stations and newspapers at least one week before the event. *(Use the example press release on the OC Work Day webpage on AWF's website.)*



Milk jugs with the tops cut off can be used to distribute crushed limestone for the path, mulch for the gardens, or water for the plants.

An outdoor classroom provides a wide variety of meaningful, hands-on, outdoor learning opportunities for your students. As you develop your outdoor classroom, look for instances to **integrate the outdoor learning stations** and schoolyard wildlife habitat into your curriculum. Utilizing your outdoor classroom as an educational tool helps ensure that the time and money you and your school invested in developing the outdoor classroom was worthwhile. In addition, the more often teachers use the outdoor classroom with their students, the greater the motivation will be to help maintain it from year to year. Below are suggestions about how to integrate the outdoor classroom into your curriculum which will increase your faculty's use of the outdoor classroom as an education tool.



When students explore their schoolyard wildlife habitat, the area becomes an “outdoor classroom” where learning becomes fun and meaningful.

- ☐ **Enlist administrative support** to provide time for teachers to examine their lesson plans and plan how they would like to include the outdoor classroom in their curriculum.
- ☐ **Survey your teachers** each year to make sure that all teachers feel comfortable using the outdoor classroom for hands-on conservation education activities, and address any concerns they may have with your planning committee, faculty, administrators, and Outdoor Classroom (OC) Consultant.
- ☐ **Schedule an in-service teacher training workshop** with your OC Consultant to learn how to use your outdoor classroom successfully and efficiently to meet academic standards.
- ☐ **Attend outdoor classroom and conservation education workshops** with fellow teachers. (*Visit the Alabama Wildlife Federation website for educator workshop dates and locations.*)
- ☐ **Review the Alabama Department of Education's Course of**
- Study Objectives** and identify which objective(s) you would like to teach using a hands-on activity in the outdoor classroom.
- ☐ **Identify which of the outdoor learning stations** you would like to utilize with each of the activities.
- ☐ **Inventory any educational resources** that your school may already have available before you invest in additional materials and curricula. (*Use the Outdoor Classroom Educational Resources checklist in the OC Planning Guide & Checklists section of AWF's website.*)
- ☐ **Create activity kits** by compiling educational resources and materials that can be used in conjunction with specific outdoor classroom learning stations or specific activities and storing these resources in plastic storage bins or backpacks. (*Review the Outdoor Classroom Activity Kit ideas in the OC Activities & Lesson Plans section of AWF's website.*)



- ❑ **Include a materials list** in each activity kit so that teachers can note when new materials need to be added to the activity kit, and establish a refurbishing system to keep the kits stocked.
- ❑ **Develop at least one Outdoor Classroom Activity Kit** per grade level or per discipline that can be used in conjunction with your outdoor learning stations so that all teachers and students will have the opportunity to use them.
- ❑ **Keep your educational resources, materials, tools and activity kits** in one or two central locations such as the media center, science lab, or tool shed in the outdoor classroom where all teachers can easily access the materials/tools.
- ❑ **Ensure accessibility and educational opportunities** to all students, including those with physical disabilities, mental or emotional challenges, or ESL (English as a second language), as you develop learning stations. *(Order a copy of the National Wildlife Federation's Access Nature activity guide from their website.)*
- ❑ **Consider the size of the class(es)** that will be utilizing the learning station and the number of students who will be participating in the activity at one time so that you can limit "downtime." For instance, if an entire class will be participating in a gardening activity at one time, consider creating a four foot by six foot raised bed garden and dividing it into twenty-four (24) 1-foot squares so that each child will have her/his own "square foot garden." Then allow the children to work in their individual gardens in 3 or 4 shifts with 6 to 8 students around the raised bed at a time.
- ❑ **Contact your local nature center, botanical gardens, conservation organization, or environmental educator** to arrange for a demonstration of conservation education activities in your outdoor classroom. If possible, have the visiting educator provide copies of their materials for teachers to reference. *(See*

the list of Community Organizations and Resources under the OC Grants, Funding & Support section of AWF's website.)

- ❑ **Recruit parents** to share their outdoor expertise (such as birding, gardening, or hunting) with students, and to help chaperone students during activities in the outdoor classroom.

FREE OUTDOOR CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES & LESSON PLANS

(via the Alabama Wildlife Federation website)

Themed Outdoor Classroom Activities

for different outdoor classroom learning stations

Outdoor Classroom Field Journal Activities

students record observations, collect data,
& use critical thinking skills

Alabama Outdoor Classroom BioBlitz

biodiversity treasure hunts with iNaturalist

Alabama Youth Wildlife Art Contests

research & depict native wildlife in natural habitats

Kid's Gardening Lesson Plans

lesson plans for plants, soils, pollinators & more

Journey North

track hummingbird & butterfly migrations

alabamawildlife.org



Visit the AWF's website for up-to-date details about Educator Workshops that provide helpful resources and activities related to the development, use, and sustainability of an outdoor classroom.



Ask local natural resource professionals from your county Extension office and Soil & Water Conservation office to provide topic-specific activities and presentations for your students.

April Lupardus Waltz



As you develop and use your outdoor classroom, be sure to **establish a maintenance plan** that includes the routine weekly maintenance tasks as well as the seasonal maintenance tasks required to sustain your outdoor learning stations for years to come. Be sure to include the teachers and students in the maintenance of the outdoor classroom so they will feel ownership of it and will be encouraged to use it as an educational tool. A properly maintained outdoor classroom and schoolyard wildlife habitat will also help attract more wildlife to the outdoor classroom site. Below are some tips that will make your maintenance easier.

Learning-Station-Adoption-Program

- ☐ **Create a “learning station maintenance folder”** for each outdoor learning station that includes the Maintenance Checklist for that learning station. *(Download the learning station maintenance checklists that your school needs from the OC Maintenance Tips section of AWF’s website.)*
- ☐ **Each August, ask each teacher/class to “adopt”** an outdoor learning station for one semester, and provide the learning station maintenance folder for the learning station that the teacher adopts.
- ☐ **Ask each teacher/class to complete** the weekly and seasonal tasks listed on the Maintenance Checklist for the learning station they adopted, and then record their maintenance task notes and observations for the next class that adopts that learning station.
- ☐ **Consider only allowing specific grade levels** to adopt specific learning stations based on the level of responsibility. For example, allow a kindergarten class to adopt and take care of the sensory garden, a first grade class to maintain the butterfly garden, a second grade class to keep the bird feeders filled, a third grade class to grow and harvest vegetables in the raised bed gardens, a fourth grade class to take care of the Eastern box turtles, and a fifth grade class to keep the pond clean and feed the fish.
- ☐ **Teachers can ask individual students** in their class to adopt a specific tree or plant in their learning station and to water and record observations for that specific plant during the “adoption period” for the learning station.



Brenda Vaughn

Students can assist with weekly maintenance responsibilities such as picking up litter, cleaning the pond, and reporting any problems to the outdoor classroom planning committee member who is in charge of the maintenance plan.

- ☐ **Develop a Weekly Tasks Checklist** that one or two students could be responsible for such as picking up litter or filling bird feeders.
- ☐ **Encourage student ownership** of the outdoor classroom by asking student clubs like the Beta Club, 4-H or Scouts to be responsible for specific maintenance tasks such as painting or staining your educational kiosks as a service-learning project.
- ☐ **Bring a Volunteer Sign-up Sheet** to your school’s Open House and other school events where parents and community members are present so that you can invite them to assist with maintenance tasks, and be sure to ask volunteers for their email addresses and phone numbers. *(Download an example Volunteer Sign-up Sheet in the Maintenance Tips section of the AWF website.)*
- ☐ **Set up an “email list” or “phone tree”** to contact volunteers regarding clean up days and special projects.
- ☐ **Discuss the maintenance tasks** with your school’s grounds staff to see if they are able to help with any of the maintenance tasks on your list such as mowing the grass, and explain that you do not want herbicides or pesticides sprayed in the outdoor classroom since it is habitat for local backyard wildlife.
- ☐ **Create a Summer Maintenance Schedule**, and have each volunteer (an individual or a family) sign up to take turns caring for the outdoor classroom for one week each during the summer so that summer maintenance is not one person’s responsibility.

Outdoor Classroom Maintenance

- ☐ **Each August, ask a planning committee member** to establish and coordinate the Outdoor Classroom (OC) Maintenance Plan for the upcoming year.
- ☐ **Create an Annual Maintenance Calendar** that addresses tasks for maintaining the overall outdoor classroom site such as gathering fallen leaves throughout the whole site in the fall, and then share the calendar with all school staff members, buildings and grounds staff, and parent and community volunteers. *(Utilize the example maintenance calendars on the OC Maintenance Tips webpage of the AWF website.)*



Ask classes to “adopt” the different learning stations and gardens for one semester to help with the weekly and seasonal maintenance.

- ❑ **Give your summer volunteers a list of specific tasks** including watering plants, filling bird feeders, and pulling weeds.
- ❑ **Keep your maintenance records** with your other outdoor classroom records in a central location such as the media center, and make sure other planning committee members know where the records are kept so that they will not have to “reinvent the wheel” the following year.

Clean Up Day Tips

- ❑ **At the beginning of each school year**, set the dates for at least one Outdoor Classroom (OC) Clean Up Day per semester on a school day (Monday – Friday) so that all students will have the opportunity to help with maintenance of your outdoor classroom.
- ❑ **When you schedule a clean up day**, check to see what other activities such as field trips, festivals or sporting events are scheduled that could greatly impact the ability of people to volunteer.
- ❑ **Schedule a “rain date”** for the following day in case of inclement weather.
- ❑ **Share the OC Clean Up Day dates** with your school staff, parents and community volunteers as soon as the date(s) are set.
- ❑ **Utilize the free OC Clean Up Day** planning materials including the Clean Up Day Checklist and example Volunteer/Donor Form on AWF’s Website to help you plan your event.
- ❑ **Create a list of the tasks** you want to complete that day and prioritize them so that you get the most important ones done first.
- ❑ **Do not try to do too much** all at once—have defined tasks that can be completed in a given amount of time.
- ❑ **Recruit reliable volunteers** to be in charge of specific tasks so the day will run more smoothly and to keep you from running from task to task.

- ❑ **Make sure you communicate** exactly what tools you will provide and what the volunteers need to bring with them to help eliminate wasted time due to not having the right tools and materials on hand.
- ❑ **When putting together a clean up schedule** for a large project that requires a full day, have people sign-up for exact time slots to help you gauge how many volunteers you will have during each stage of the project.
- ❑ **Be flexible** and offer one-hour time slots for your volunteers.
- ❑ **Schedule some outdoor classroom clean ups** on Saturdays for parents and community volunteers who are unable to take time off during the work week.
- ❑ **Try to keep weekend clean up days limited** to the morning hours so that your volunteers do not have to give up a whole day of their weekend.
- ❑ **Invite community groups** such as local churches to assist with clean up days and special projects.

Make Weekend Work Days Fun!

- ❖ Use themes to make working in the outdoor classroom feel more like a festival than a chore.
- ❖ Provide cold drinks and tasty snacks.
- ❖ Provide a shady area for volunteers to rest.
- ❖ Hold contests to see who can pull the most weeds.
- ❖ Invite volunteers and students to paint designs on garden structures.
- ❖ Vary the activities for volunteers, so that people do not have to pull weeds every time they volunteer.
- ❖ Ask older students or volunteers to do craft projects or play games that relate to the outdoor classroom with younger children so little ones do not feel excluded and they are kept busy allowing parents to work.
- ❖ Rename common tasks to give them more meaning. For example, rather than focusing on “pulling weeds,” call it “collecting a ‘food harvest’ for the earthworms in your compost bin.”



Now that you have completed at least Phase I of your outdoor classroom and schoolyard wildlife habitat, and you are using it as an education tool with your students, it is **time to certify your outdoor classroom!** Your Outdoor Classroom (OC) Consultant will meet with you and your planning committee once you are ready to start the certification process, which includes submitting a certification application, conducting an on-site review with your OC Consultant, and holding a Certification Ceremony to celebrate your accomplishments. Below are the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program certification details.



After completing the certification process, schools host an Outdoor Classroom Certification Ceremony, inviting their local superintendent, school board members, and mayor along with all of their volunteers and supporters to help them celebrate.

Certification Requirements

There are no specific deadlines that your school must meet to apply for certification. Most schools take at least two to five years to develop their outdoor classroom to the point that they are ready for certification.

Before you apply for certification, your school must meet the following requirements:

- ☐ **An active planning committee** that meets at least two times in the fall and two times in the spring,
- ☐ **A sustainable Master Plan** that has been submitted and updated through the online Master Plan form on the Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF) website,
- ☐ **Outdoor learning stations** that are identified with educational signage,
- ☐ **A wildlife habitat** that provides food, water, shelter and places to raise young for local backyard wildlife,
- ☐ **Educational hands-on activities** that are conducted in conjunction with the outdoor learning stations,
- ☐ **An in-service outdoor classroom workshop** for your faculty,
- ☐ **A maintenance plan** that includes weekly and seasonal maintenance tasks and a summer maintenance schedule, and
- ☐ **An outdoor classroom site** that you are ready to present as a model for other schools across Alabama.

Certification To-Do List

When your school has met the certification requirements, you and your planning committee must do the following to apply for certification:



- ☐ **Contact your OC Consultant** to let her/him know that your school would like to begin the certification process,
- ☐ **Fill out and submit** the Alabama Outdoor Classroom certification application,
- ☐ **Fill out and submit** the National Wildlife Federation's Schoolyard Habitat certification application, and
- ☐ **Meet with your OC Consultant** to review your outdoor classroom site and to discuss your certification details.

Benefits of Certification

When you have achieved certification, we will help you organize a certification ceremony so that you can celebrate your accomplishments and recognize your school's volunteers, sponsors and partners who helped you develop your outdoor classroom. If you prefer not to have a ceremony, we can present your certification awards at a faculty meeting instead.

Upon certification, your school will receive the following:

- ❖ An official Alabama Outdoor Classroom Certification Sign;
- ❖ An official Alabama Outdoor Classroom Certificate;
- ❖ An Outdoor Classroom Activity Kit including educational materials and supplies such as magnifying loupes, field guides, etc.;
- ❖ Full set of *Discovering Alabama* DVDs and Teacher Guides from Dr. Doug Phillips; and
- ❖ National Wildlife Federation Schoolyard Habitats Certificate.

Student Participation in the Certification Ceremony

Invite ALL students to attend the certification ceremony, and include students in the ceremony by asking them to assist with the following:

- ❖ Greet visitors as they arrive,
- ❖ Read a poem they wrote inspired by the outdoor classroom,
- ❖ Sing or perform a song about nature or the outdoors,
- ❖ Describe their observations from outdoor classroom activities,
- ❖ Lead a tour of the outdoor classroom for the visitors and dignitaries,
- ❖ Explain the purpose of specific learning stations during the tour, and
- ❖ Serve refreshments to dignitaries after the ceremony.



Keys to Success After Certification

If you have followed this guide, you will have done a great deal of work to create an outdoor classroom that will be used as an effective teaching tool for many years to come. As students, parents, teachers and administrators come and go each year, your school will change and so will your outdoor classroom. However, as your outdoor classroom transforms, it can also become a staple of your school's campus and an indispensable education tool for teachers and students alike. Below are "keys to success" to help your current outdoor classroom planning committee and those to come.

Tips for Long-term Success

- ❑ **Planning Committee Records:** Keep records of your volunteers, sponsors, project plans, master plan, activity ideas, grant proposals, event fliers and photos.
- ❑ **Outdoor Classroom Webpage:** Update your school's outdoor classroom (OC) webpage photos and information including your planning committee's email addresses so that everyone will receive the OC E-newsletter which includes activity ideas, grant tips and workshop opportunities. *To review and update your school's OC webpage, visit the Alabama Outdoor Classroom Schools Map on AWF's website.*
- ❑ **Wildlife Habitat Assessment:** Assess the wildlife habitat resources (food, water, shelter & places to raise young) available in your outdoor classroom using the tips on the Schoolyard Wildlife Habitat section of AWF's website, and then add any resources such as native plants to improve the habitat.
- ❑ **Outdoor Classroom Site Map:** Review your school's outdoor classroom site map(s), and work with your local OC Consultant to update the site map if needed.
- ❑ **Maintenance Plan:** Review your Maintenance Plan from the previous school year and summer, and discuss what worked and what did not. Teachers who help maintain the outdoor classroom with their students are more likely to use the outdoor classroom as an educational tool.
- ❑ **Faculty & Parent Update:** Provide an update about the outdoor classroom to the faculty at the beginning of each semester and throughout the year on an as-needed basis, and give a presentation to the PTA/PTO at least once a year. Keeping key people like the principal, faculty, and parents informed and involved are vital to the success and sustainability of your outdoor classroom.
- ❑ **Faculty Survey:** Contact your local OC Consultant to set up a free online faculty survey at the beginning of each school year to gather feedback about which learning stations the teachers use the most, what resources they need to use the outdoor classroom as an educational tool, and who would like to serve on the planning committee.
- ❑ **Suggestion Box:** Put out a "Suggestion Box" so that you can continue to assess the needs and thoughts of all outdoor classroom users, and make changes accordingly.



Most importantly: Keep using it! Keep your students, parents and volunteers involved! Keep the excitement flowing!

- ❑ **Outdoor Classroom Usage Log:** Create an outdoor classroom log for teachers to note which activity stations and activity kits they used.
- ❑ **Student Data:** Keep track of student data (anecdotal and actual statistics) that show a correlation between improved academic performances and the use of the outdoor classroom.
- ❑ **Educator Workshops:** Continue to attend conservation education workshops and events to give you new activity and learning station ideas.
- ❑ **PTA/PTO Budget:** Ask the PTA/PTO to include a \$500 to \$1,000 allocation in their annual budget for activity supplies, bird food, and long-term maintenance.
- ❑ **Annual Improvements:** Assess your outdoor classroom once a year for any needed repairs or improvements, and integrate the improvements into the long-term plans. Be sure to check on the following:
 - ❖ Signs of erosion or flooding
 - ❖ Health of plantings
 - ❖ Conditions of structures
 - ❖ Definition of paths
 - ❖ Litter or vandalism issues
 - ❖ Nearby safety hazards
 - ❖ General accessibility

Always be open to the possibility that future teachers may want to add to or change the outdoor classroom as this will help generate future support and instill a feeling of ownership in potential new planning committee members. Remain flexible, don't be afraid to change your plans, and have fun!