
COMMENTARY

Time to make outdoor instruction a part of education

By Bill Stoneman

As New York schools prepare to welcome students back, educators are wrestling with what the school day will look like and where it will occur. School

districts seem to suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic leaves us with two unappealing choices — children in front of screens at home or in classrooms that have been closed since March — or a

mix of the two. Yet there is a third venue that could and should take at least some pressure off the online vs. indoors question: the great outdoors.

Outdoor instruction is not a panacea in these difficult times. But 10 or 20 days of teaching and learning in fresh air in the fall and as many in the spring would at least allow more in-person

instruction than would otherwise occur. And it would reduce time with the very problematic leading options.

The idea leverages the growing consensus that transmission of the virus causing COVID-19 is less likely outdoors than it is indoors. New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio cited that benefit on Monday in announcing plans

to incorporate outdoor learning in city schools this fall. But voluminous academic research published long before the word “coronavirus” was part of our shared vocabulary offers an equally compelling argument for outdoor instruction. Indeed, research shows that contact with nature supports academic per-

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formance, well-being, resilience, impulse control, attentiveness and much more.

The evidence is so impressive that back in January, before New York schools shut down, the Vegetable Project, a volunteer nonprofit school gardening group that raises funds nickels and dimes at a time, was talking with teachers at an Albany middle school about scrounging up the cash to rent a tent to test-drive the concept and demonstrate the efficacy of holding occasional classes outdoors.

Surely consideration of outdoor instruction is more important now than ever, though the New York state Education Department was silent on the idea in its July 16 guidance to reopen the state's schools, beyond noting fire and building code requirements that apply to tents. But the importance of outdoor instruction is not new at all, or at least shouldn't be for anyone concerned about the rising incidence of anxiety, depression and obesity among kids or with growing understanding that trauma impedes healthy development and then, by extension, academic performance.

These maladies have much to do with lives increasingly removed from nature, as Richard Louv writes in "Last Child

in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder." Louv posits that we can address many of these issues by reacquainting our young people with the natural world.

Frances Kuo, who studies the intersection of access to nature and human health at the University of Illinois, quantifies Louv's observations in paper after paper with her own research. She finds, for example, evidence in one publication that kids perform better in a traditional classroom lesson that follows one in a natural setting than they do in one indoor lesson after another.

"This nature advantage held across different teachers and held equally over the initial and final five weeks of lessons," Kuo wrote. "And the magnitude of the advantage was large."

Education thinkers increasingly recognize that health — physical, mental, social and emotional — provides critical foundation for academic performance. We see, however, less acknowledgement of Louv and Kuo's insight, that environment contributes enormously to health. Exposure to fresh air, flora and fauna matter.

And so given the great downsides to online instruction and bringing kids into classrooms, the urgency to harness this insight — and move some classes outdoors — is greater than ever.