



NATURE-BASED PRESCHOOLS: A PATHWAY

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR CITIES

Nature preschools—those that use nature as the [organizing principle](#) for their programs and in which young children spend a significant portion of their time outdoors—represent a [growing trend](#) in early childhood education. With features such as outdoor classrooms, naturalized playgrounds, gardens, and sometimes access to forests and other wild spaces, these schools rely on nature as the object and setting for learning and play. Nature preschools integrate best practices in early childhood education and environmental education and use the natural environment to achieve child development goals. Guided by experienced educators, children in nature preschools have the opportunity to learn social interaction skills, problem solving, independence, negotiation, and creativity as well as literacy and language skills. [Research](#) has shown that nature preschools contribute to healthy cognitive functioning as well as prosocial skills, which support school readiness. Nature preschools also support other city priorities including early childhood quality improvement and climate resilience.

At present, many nature preschools are privately run, may not meet state licensing guidelines, and are more likely to serve white children according to a [2017 survey](#) by the Natural Start Alliance – all factors suggesting areas for growth and development of the nature preschools field. Nevertheless, for cities wishing to introduce and expand equitable access to nature through nature preschools, CCCN’s 2021 landscape scan identified several approaches:

Through its 2021 landscape scan CCCN identified several ways cities can introduce and expand nature preschools:

Develop nature preschools in city-run nature centers. Cities can reimagine or develop public preschools to align with the nature preschool model, and offer them in settings such as nature centers. This likely implies a combination of introducing new curricula, training staff, and redesigning grounds. City-run programs can offer similar or lower pricing than private nature preschools in order to enroll children who have traditionally had less access to nature. If permitted under state child care licensing, full-day programming is more suitable to the needs of working families.

Host privately-run nature preschools within city parks, making appropriate adjustments for equity. Many private nature preschools operate full-time within city parks; others utilize parks for programming regularly. Without starting or reimaging public preschools, cities have the opportunity to partner with private centers to meet goals of increasing nature-based programming and reaching new families.

Assemble funds and practical resources to support more children to attend nature preschools. Cities can assemble funds or benefit packages to offer tuition assistance or the gear that families need to send children to nature preschools.

CITY & STATE EXAMPLES

Baltimore. Baltimore's Department of Recreation and Parks runs The Forest Preschool at the Carrie Murray Nature Center. In operation since 2018, the preschool provides full-day care and half-day programming five days a week for 24 children every day. Focused on experiential and child-directed learning outdoors, the program includes time and space for open-ended play, investigation, and creative expression. The nature preschools are priced similar to other preschools nearby and are less expensive than nearby private nature preschools. The school is currently working on obtaining licensure which will enable it to accept state tuition subsidies which will allow the preschool to reach more lower-income families. The hope is to expand this model at other Baltimore City parks.

Boise. In Boise, Idaho two city-sponsored nature preschools support key city strategies of enhancing early childhood education and climate action. The Parks and Recreation Department operates an [Outdoor Preschool](#) at The Jim Hall Foothills Environmental Learning Center as well as the [Boise Urban Garden School](#) (BUGS) which focuses on gardening and sustainability. Both offer half-day programs three days a week and a Friday drop-off program. Tuition for these programs is lower than private nature preschools programs and scholarships are available. The preschool programs represent one offering of [Boise Environmental Education](#) (BEE); this multi-agency partnership also includes the Learning Center, Boise Community Forestry, Boise Urban Garden School, Boise Watershed, Public Works Air Quality Programs, and Zoo Boise.

Washington State. Licensing Nature In spring 2021 the Washington State legislature passed and the Governor signed [Senate Bill 5151](#), making Washington the first state in the country to permanently license outdoor preschools. The bill had overwhelming bipartisan support and passed following a three-year pilot program that developed and evaluated health and safety rules for nature preschools. Passage of this legislation means that Washington's nature preschools can now offer full-day programs that meet the needs of working families, participate in coaching and quality improvement initiatives, access state subsidies to provide free and reduced tuition to eligible low-income families, and apply for federal grant dollars allocated to childcare businesses impacted by COVID closures. Further, the new law reflects the emphasis of the Washington Department of Children, Youth, and Families' [Strategic Plan](#), which prioritizes creating a high-quality integrated birth through age 8 system while eliminating racial disparities.

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION

Cities seeking to expand or create nature preschools may consider using a combination of several tactics:

- **Identify existing city-run preschools to expand nature programming.** Examine current city-sponsored childcare and preschool programs to identify options for introducing components of the [nature preschool model](#) (whether run directly by city staff or through a partner).

- **Build awareness of and demand for nature preschools.** Whereas nature or forest preschools are commonplace in many parts of Europe, in the US they are still a new innovation. Thus, city leaders may need to raise awareness of nature preschools--and their many benefits. Awareness raising techniques include outreach and engagement of administrators, educators, and parents and messaging such as the importance of time in nature for young children.
- **Analyze the local policy environment.** Cities can develop and employ template agreements for hosting nature preschools in city parks, and also encourage field trips or similar uses. Cities can also publicize how parents may use child care subsidies to send children to nature preschools. Examine state child care licensing standards -- often designed for indoor settings -- to see if they permit a nature preschool to offer the full-day options so critical to working families, or access state subsidies that assist low-income families with childcare costs. If state licensing regulations constitute a barrier, cities can work with the state licensing agency and other early childhood partners at the state and local levels to adopt licensing changes similar to those in Washington and Colorado. For more on this topic, see the Policy section of this Toolkit.
- **Support certification and ongoing professional development.** Directly offer or partner with organizations offering nature-based professional development training sessions to educators to increase comfort and skill with nature. Regional and national organizations can also be resources: several provide certification in nature education including the [Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools](#) (ERAFNS) and the Natural Learning Initiative's [Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Environments Certificate Program](#).
- **Engage parents and caregivers.** Ensure prospective families know about nature preschool programs with nature additions through marketing, direct outreach, and partnerships with local organizations. Cities can consider creating an online resource hub which includes information such as how connect young children with nature at home or other opportunities for families to engage with nature in their community. Nature preschool programming can also give away seeds, recipes, or other nature-related resources to families.

PARTNERSHIPS TO CONSIDER

Cities wanting to explore nature preschools may want to consider various sources of partnership:

Local: In addition to city park departments, other local organizations focused on environmental education, outdoor learning, gardening, and animals all represent potential resources or partners for nature preschools.

Regional/State: State-level environmental and outdoor education associations can provide useful resources. Nature preschool associations at the state and regional levels, such as the [Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools](#) (ERAFNS) are also resources.

National: Two primary national organizations with curricular, peer learning, and other programming resources for nature preschools include the Council of Nature and Forest Preschools and the [Natural Start Alliance](#). Resources available from the Alliance include the [Nature-Based Preschool Professional Practice Guidebook](#) and [Nature-Based Preschools in the US: 2020 Snapshot](#). Helpful guidance for an equity approach to outdoor preschools developed by the Willamette Partnership in Oregon can be found [here](#).