



What We Should Keep from Pandemic Learning: Outdoor Learning Spaces

By Educator Barnes – November 5, 2020

When 2020 began, there was lots of talk about having “2020 vision” and seeing the future clearly. Little did we all know that a pandemic was on the horizon. The pandemic had a huge impact on many aspects of life including our schools. Now, the shift has been from “2020 vision” to “throw the whole year away.” Yes, the year has been hard, but every aspect has not been horrible. This series, “What We Should Keep from Pandemic Learning” will highlight positive elements of school during the pandemic that should continue into 2021 and beyond.

When I was a kid, one of my favorite field trips was to the Indianapolis Museum of Art, now known as Newfields. I enjoyed having art class outside. I was relaxed, calm, and focused. As a school administrator, I have had the opportunity to observe three of the teachers I supervise teaching outside. What I have loved the most is the joy on students' faces.

My school has a Big Green learning garden. The learning garden has been one of the places where students have had class outside. One of the classes that have taken place there is STEM. Big Green Indianapolis Program Manager Laura Henderson was also impressed by what she saw and she explained how she shared what she observed with others.

We have been reading the recommendations of the American Academy of Pediatrics and others that encourage outdoor class instruction during Covid, but at least in Indianapolis, this is the only example I know of where a teacher has transformed the Learning Garden into their primary classroom. We had a virtual workshop for other Indianapolis teachers yesterday, and I was delighted to be able to share the model with them. I could see teachers nodding their heads, taking notes and looking generally very engaged and interested during this portion of the workshop.

Outdoor learning spaces give students a change of scenery. It also gives them different seating options. Students can sit on mats, the grass, benches, hay bales, etc. Voice levels are also more flexible outdoors.

There is some preparation that is needed. Students will need a hard surface to write on if that is required. A plan is needed if it starts to rain all of a sudden. Some students might have allergies, so letting parents know that their children will be in an outdoor learning space is helpful.

Even when this pandemic ends, outdoor learning should continue and schools should intentionally build outdoor learning spaces.