

# *Guidance for Supporting Students with Disabilities in Outdoor Education*

## **Purpose**

Students who participate in outdoor learning are more likely to graduate, show gains in social and emotional learning, develop healthy relationships with peers, and have higher academic achievement<sup>1</sup>. Outdoor learning provides opportunities for students to develop leadership and collaboration skills by engaging in hands-on, real-world learning with their peers. As full members of school communities, students with disabilities have the right to access and make progress in the general education curriculum, regardless of the instructional setting.

The purpose of this document is to help ensure educators are prepared to welcome all students, including those with disabilities who are eligible for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan, into outdoor learning opportunities and to raise awareness that there is grant funding for a wide variety of supports, from specialized equipment to staff time and more. **The assumption must be that students with diverse needs will enter the outdoor learning space and have choice with diverse options for the ways they engage in outdoor learning.** We encourage you to distribute this document to all building level administrators and members of 504 and IEP teams.

## **Funding for Districts to Support Outdoor Education for Students with Disabilities**

During the 2022 legislative session, the Legislature passed [Second Substitute House Bill 2078 \(2022\)](#), establishing the [Outdoor Learning Grant Program](#). The program's purpose is to develop and support educational experiences for students in Washington public schools with high levels of accessibility for students with disabilities, ensuring that students with disabilities will also receive the benefits of outdoor learning described above. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) oversees the administration of the Outdoor Learning Grant Program with support from Outdoor Schools Washington (OSWA) and the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO). The program aims to create outdoor learning experiences where all students feel welcome, safe, respected, and free to participate in every aspect of outdoor education as their authentic, whole selves.

## **Considerations When Planning for Outdoor Learning**

Local Education Agencies (LEAs), specifically schools, school districts and Educational Service Districts (ESDs), determine what, where, and how outdoor education programming will occur.

---

<sup>1</sup> From [Children and Nature Network](#)



LEAs may receive outdoor learning grants from OSPI, and/or outdoor learning grant funded opportunities through community partners, and/or request funding to participate in outdoor school. Neither OSPI, OSWA nor RCO deliver outdoor education programming. Rather, the school, community partners, and/or outdoor school providers deliver programming.

Within each of these models, there are opportunities to request additional funding through OSPI's Outdoor Learning Grant Program to pay for (in part or in full) specific accommodations, modifications, and support staff a student with an IEP or 504 Plan needs to access and benefit from an outdoor education program, or to make general updates to existing outdoor programming to improve accessibility for students with disabilities. The goal is to ensure all students with disabilities can successfully engage in outdoor learning experiences with their peers who do not have disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate, in line with Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) requirements under both Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504.

## Accessibility and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

LEAs are expected that designing an outdoor learning experience that follows UDL principles will be a collaborative effort that may include the outdoor learning provider, the outdoor learning site/facility manager, OSWA staff<sup>2</sup>, a school district representative who coordinates the outdoor school or outdoor learning experience, and/or OSPI staff<sup>3</sup>.

When developing outdoor learning opportunities, school and district staff should incorporate principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) into all aspects of planning, asking questions such as:

- How will all students engage in learning and make choices about their learning?
- What materials will be provided, and are they accessible to all students?
- Are there multiple ways for students to demonstrate their learning?
- How will students interact with adults and classmates, ask questions, and request assistance?
- How will all students access the physical and sensory features of the outdoor learning space?
- How can schools and providers collaborate to improve the learning opportunity for students who need additional supports (e.g. pictures and maps to reduce a student's anxiety; virtually meeting guest educators ahead of the experience; practice with specialized outdoor clothing and gear)?
- Who are key collaborators to ensure UDL is incorporated into all aspects of the outdoor learning opportunity (e.g. community partners, outdoor school providers)?

For more information, see the CAST resource [UDL Tips for Designing Learning Experiences](#).

---

<sup>2</sup> Contact OSWA at [info@outdoorschoolswa.org](mailto:info@outdoorschoolswa.org)

<sup>3</sup> Contact OSPI at [sheila.wilson@k12.wa.us](mailto:sheila.wilson@k12.wa.us)

## Keys to Success: Ongoing Collaboration with Outdoor Learning Providers and Administration

Ongoing planning and collaboration are key to successfully supporting students with disabilities in outdoor learning opportunities. This requires IEP and Section 504 teams, outdoor education providers, and outdoor school providers, including facilities personnel, to collaborate to share information and think creatively about identifying and implementing successful strategies for eliminating barriers to outdoor learning for students with disabilities.

Communication with the outdoor school, outdoor learning provider, and/or their facilities may need to occur for planning a student's IEP or 504 Plan. When possible, teams should plan for outdoor learning opportunities during the annual review of the IEP or any review of the 504 Plan, and no later than one month before the outdoor learning event(s). Teams need to consider the effects of shifts in location, setting, required clothing/gear, and instructional modality of services to make recommendations for new supports to meet the needs of students.

### Considerations for Specially Designed Instruction

Specially designed instruction<sup>4</sup> (SDI) means adapting, as appropriate to the needs of a student eligible for special education services, the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction to:

- address the unique needs of the student that result from their disability, and
- ensure access of the student to the general education curriculum.

When instruction in the general education curriculum is provided in outdoor learning environments, students eligible for special education services must be able to access it. LEAs are responsible for the provision of SDI while students are participating in outdoor school and other outdoor learning opportunities. IEP teams should carefully consider how best to provide SDI in these environments to ensure students eligible for special education services can access core content and other learning opportunities designed for these spaces.

While a certificated special education staff and/or certificated educational staff associate must design SDI, other staff, including general education teachers and paraeducators, may assist in providing SDI<sup>5</sup> as long as they are supervised by the certificated special education staff. When considering the provision of SDI in outdoor learning, teams are advised to collaborate with the following individuals/entities:

- LEA representative responsible for completing the outdoor school/outdoor learning funding application, and/or
- The outdoor school and/or outdoor learning program providers, and/or
- OSPI outdoor learning staff for on or off campus day trips, and/or
- OSWA staff for overnight outdoor school

---

<sup>4</sup> [WAC 392-172A-01175\(3\)\(c\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [WAC 392-172A-02090\(1\)\(i\)](#)

*\*\* Note: LEAs may need to provide guidance to outdoor education staff and teachers to differentiate instruction and collaborate to meet all students' needs.*

## **Assistive Technology and Specialized Equipment**

For a student who needs specific assistive technology to receive FAPE in the LRE at outdoor school as determined by the IEP/504 team (e.g. Adven-Chair off-road wheelchair, satellite Wi-Fi technology, etc.), districts can access this equipment in a variety of ways, including:

- borrowing assistive technology/specialized equipment from OSWA
- purchasing assistive technology/specialized equipment with grant funds.
- utilizing the equipment and expertise of partnering organization Outdoors for All<sup>4</sup> at no cost.

There are funds available to support each of these options. To explore available funding, we encourage a member of a student's IEP/504 team to contact OSPI as soon as possible.

## **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)**

Communication is vital for students with disabilities as it serves as the foundation for learning, social interaction, and self-advocacy. Effective communication allows students to express their needs, share their ideas, and participate actively in their educational environment. It also fosters connections with peers and teachers, promoting a sense of belonging and inclusion. Without appropriate communication tools and strategies, students with disabilities may face significant barriers to academic engagement and social opportunities. Therefore, providing robust communication support, such as Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools, is essential to ensure that all students can thrive.

AAC can play a crucial role in helping students with disabilities access and fully participate in outdoor education experiences. AAC systems provide students with various means to communicate effectively, whether through speech-generating devices, picture exchange systems, or communication boards. These tools empower students to express their needs, thoughts, and observations during outdoor activities. Furthermore, AAC can help educators tailor their instruction to meet the diverse needs of all students, ensuring that everyone can benefit from the enriching experiences that outdoor education offers. By incorporating AAC, schools can create a more inclusive environment that supports the communication and learning needs of all students, enabling them to explore, discover, and connect with the natural world.

For more information, see the TIES Center resource [\*Inclusive Practice Series: Communicative Supports\*](#).

## **Recommendations for District Representatives and School Administrators**

- Share this guidance document with students, parents, and caregivers.
- If not current practice, encourage IEP and 504 teams to regularly discuss the student's

participation in outdoor learning opportunities at 504 and IEP meetings, including identifying disability-related accommodations, modifications, and other supports a student will need to successfully take part in outdoor school or other outdoor learning experiences.

- Proactively contact community outdoor school programs/outdoor learning facilities to better understand what supports students may need to make them accessible for students with disabilities. If possible, visit them or request a video tour to assist IEP and 504 team planning related to outdoor education.
- Consider inviting a staff member from the outdoor school program/outdoor learning facility to a student's IEP or 504 meeting—which may be as early as a 4th grade IEP or 504 meeting for a student attending outdoor school in 5th grade.
- To ease the grant application process, ensure the district staff member responsible for submitting the grant application is prepared to provide clear information about identified student(s) needs and any costs associated with these needs.
  - There are funds available to districts to support these expenses. They need to be requested in the respective district's funding application for outdoor school and included in the budget for [outdoor learning grants](#). Examples of expenses covered include specialized transportation, paraprofessional time, assistive technology, and more.
  - If you do not know who completes your district's funding application, ask your administrator, or contact OSWA or OSPI staff.
- If the IEP or 504 team determines that the community's outdoor school or outdoor learning experience is not an appropriate setting and would like to explore a more specialized program/facility, contact OSWA or OSPI staff.

## Additional Information on Funding Your Outdoor Learning

The Outdoor Learning Grant Program includes three funding streams: overnight outdoor school for 5th or 6th graders through OSWA, grants for schools/STEC schools/districts/Educational Service Districts through OSPI, and competitive grants for tribes, agencies and community-based organizations through RCO, all of which can be accessed from OSPI's [Outdoor Learning Grant Program webpage](#). To learn more, contact Sheila Wilson, Outdoor Learning Grant Program Manager at [sheila.wilson@k12.wa.us](mailto:sheila.wilson@k12.wa.us) or 360-561-0203.