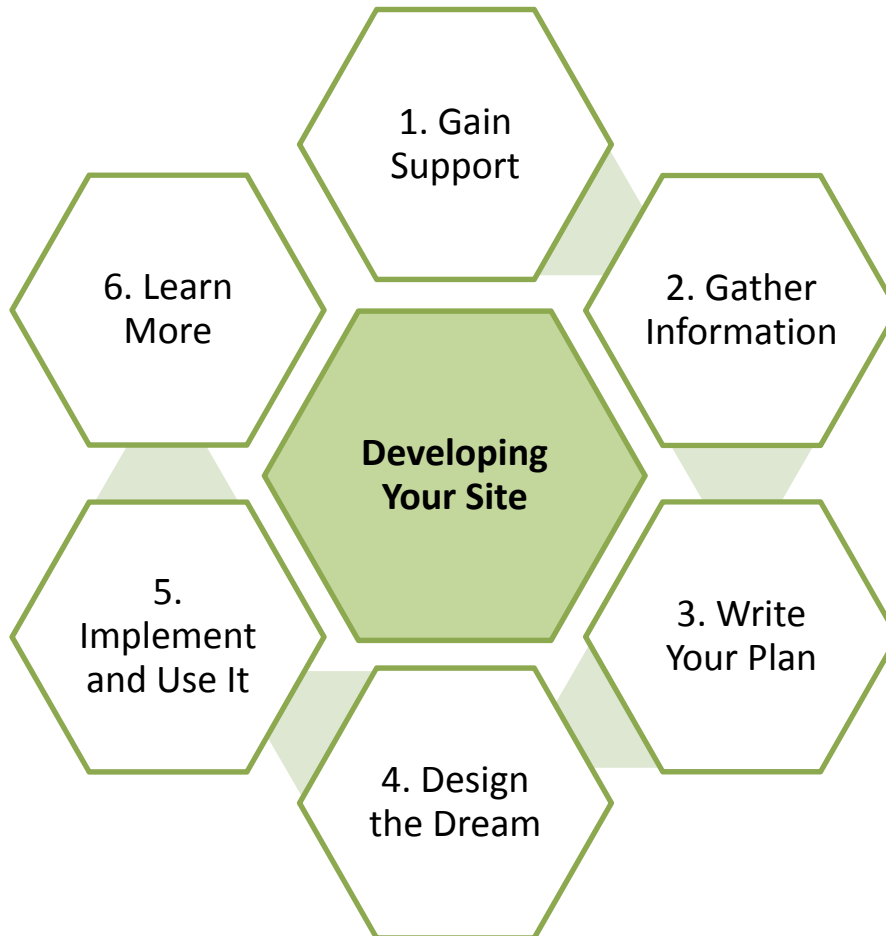


Develop Your Site

A Handbook for Your Own School Grounds Learning Site

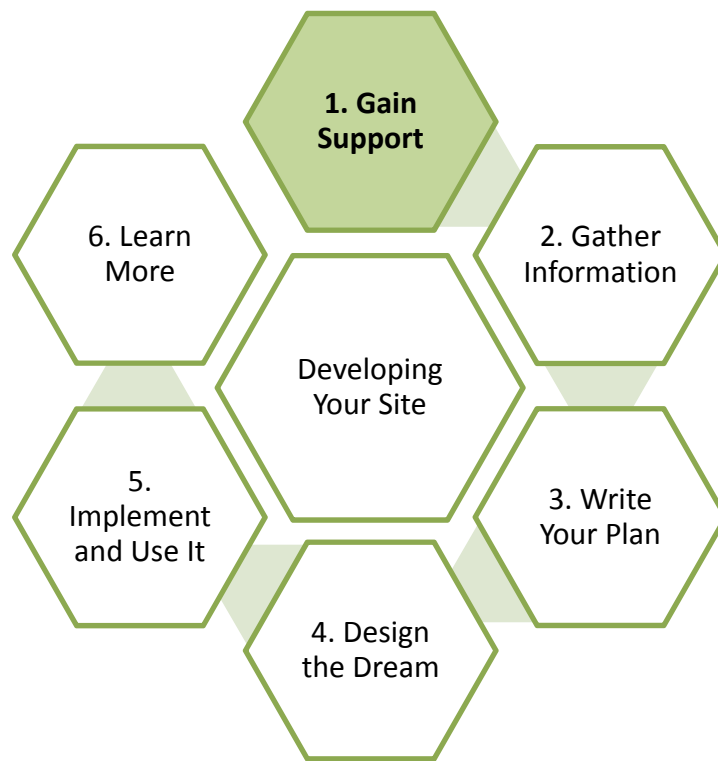
Education outside your classroom makes your students thrive! This is going to be big, don't plan to do it alone. Remember to take your time - good education is your goal.



LEAF is a partnership program between
Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources – Division of Forestry
and
Wisconsin Center for Environmental Education

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1. Gain support

Let's face it. This isn't going to be easy. One or two people can't do this alone. You are going to need a broad base of support – interested people committed to seeing the project through to completion. Involving a wide variety of people from the beginning will help prevent burnout and keep interest high. It will also ensure that teachers, students, administrators, facilities staff, and the community feel a sense of ownership in the school grounds project. So get started on creating a School Grounds Committee.

Potential School Grounds Committee Members

When deciding who to invite to be on your school grounds committee, think about who will bring diverse ideas and resources to help accomplish project goals. Be sure your school grounds committee is large enough to be inclusive, yet small enough to be effective. Committees of seven, nine, or eleven people seem to be most productive. Below is an extensive list of people who could be crucial to the success of your project. These people could just be involved in subcommittees or included in other ways.

- School board members
- School administration representative – Include your school superintendent, a school district administrator, or a building principal.
- School district facilities management staff - Their perspective will be invaluable in heading off location and maintenance issues.
- Teachers – Try to include at least one elementary, middle, and high school teacher.
- Students – They add a fresh perspective to the committee and participating on the committee provides an opportunity for them to gain valuable leadership experience.
- Parents – Active parents are a great resource.
- Retired school district teachers and administrators can bring a historical perspective and sense of commitment to your school forest committee.

- Resource specialists – Include natural resource specialists who could help to address the special qualities of your school grounds project. Municipal urban forestry staff, local tree and landscape company staff, Wisconsin DNR staff, Natural Resource Conservation Service (formerly SCS), Bureau of Indian Affairs, County Land Conservation Departments, and your county UW–Extension.
- Community organizations – Organizations in the community are potential sources for support, funding, or muscle power. Consider: youth organizations, civic groups, garden clubs, businesses, neighboring public and private schools that do not have a developed school site of their own, universities, colleges, and technical/vocational schools, local churches, bird-watching groups, and neighborhood associations.

Select a School Grounds Chairperson

One of the first tasks of the committee should be to select a school grounds chairperson. Once your school grounds chairperson is identified, notify LEAF, at leaf@uwsp.edu so that you receive timely information about managing your school grounds program. The chairperson should be able to:

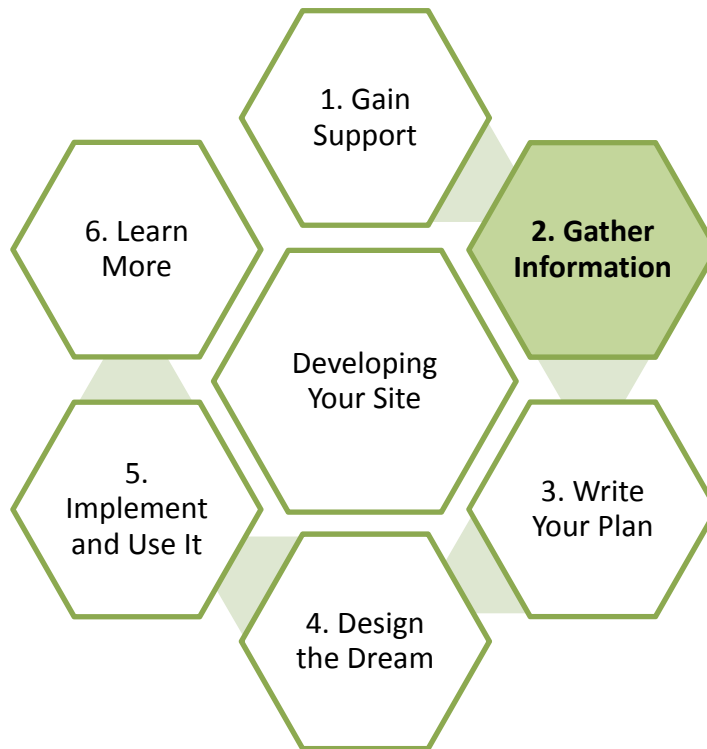
- Chair the school grounds committee.
- Coordinate communication with the school board.
- Assist teachers in using the school grounds.
- Coordinate and schedule lessons.
- Supervise the maintenance of the school grounds project.

Initial responsibilities of the school grounds committee include:

- Establish frequency and length of meetings. This may vary as you develop your school ground project. Your group might initially need to meet more often. Don't meet just for the sake of meeting!
- Define the role of the school grounds committee. Will the committee be an advisory committee or a decision-making committee?
- Define the role that students will play in the planning and development process.
- Define the expectations of each member. Are individuals on the committee to support the program, provide funding sources, coordinate work projects, or provide leadership?
- Select a school grounds coordinator.
- Inventory the features of the site or arrange for the inventory process.
- Investigate curriculum development.
- Plan for maintenance or up-keep.

The long-term responsibilities of the school grounds committee include:

- Coordinate the development of environmental education programs on the school grounds with curriculum needs.
- Make recommendations to the school board for the development, maintenance, and use of the school grounds.
- Implement and evaluate a master plan.
- Write articles for local newspapers, school newsletters, and media about the educational opportunities for students on the school grounds.
- Ongoing communication with the LEAF School Grounds program at leaf@uwsp.edu



2. Gather Information

Take time to learn more about your site and the opinions of the school community. By doing brief needs assessments with staff and students and a site assessment, you'll have all the information you need to create your written plan.

Obtain District Information

Find out the total number of students and teachers who could potentially use the site. List students and teachers by grade level or discipline.

Needs Assessments

Find out how the school grounds are being used for educational purposes and how students and staff view the school grounds project. Simple surveys will help identify the direction your educational goals should go. This is a very important step that shouldn't be skipped. It is crucial that other district personnel (besides those on the school grounds committee) have a voice in developing the program. The more interest in the program, and the greater amount of needs that are addressed at this stage, the more successful your school grounds program will be. We've created example needs assessments that you may want to use for gathering information. They begin on page 11. Remember there are free web-based tools to help you conduct your survey as well that make it easier to administer and tabulate the results of the survey.

Site assessment

You will need some basic information about your school grounds site to begin planning. A basic site inventory begins on page 17 and is a good place to get started for your planning process. It reviews the site itself and educational opportunities on it.

If you have the ability to do it, a more in-depth site inventory is helpful. Involve students in extensive inventory activities whenever possible. Involving students allows them to feel empowered and have a sense of ownership about the site project. They will be able to develop good problem solving and identification skills. A list of the information you may want to include on your detailed site inventory can be found on page 23. A detailed current map of the site features is a good extension of this process.



3. Write Your Plan

Now that your committee is formed and you are armed with information, you are ready to create a written plan. Your plan should give readers a basic understanding of why your school grounds project is important, what topics the education programs will cover, and how the school grounds site will be developed.

Write Your Mission Statement

It is important to have a clearly stated mission. The process of crafting your statement will clarify the vague feelings and thoughts that are swirling in each committee member's head. It will give your group a common vision that you can refer to when questions arise about what direction you should be heading.

A mission statement should clarify:

- Who you are
- What you do
- Why you do it

Think about what it is that you want your school grounds project to do for students, teachers, the district, and the community. Why are you trying to develop the school grounds? If you can answer these questions, then you have a handle on your mission.

Write Your Value Statement

The value statement describes why outdoor environmental education and learning on the school grounds are important to your school district. As a committee, discuss why the school grounds project is an important asset to the school district. What are the benefits of an outdoor classroom to student learning? What are the benefits of an outdoor classroom for teachers? Utilize the existing research that has determined that environmental education increases test scores and

attendance while decreasing behavioral problems. The statement should be broad enough to include all grade levels and subject areas in the school district.

Analyze and Summarize the Needs Assessment Results

This section should summarize information such as:

- Interest in using the school grounds for learning among teachers, administrators, and/or students
- Barriers to using the school grounds for learning
- Knowledge base and comfort of teachers related to outdoor EE
- Logistical needs, e.g., class time, safety, protocol for use, permission, etc.
- What do teachers need in order to utilize the school grounds for student lessons?
- What are the first priorities the school grounds committee should “tackle” in order to begin moving the school grounds program forward for the district?

Set Goals

Both short-term and long-term goals are important to identify for the school grounds project. Make a list of these goals and regularly revisit them during committee meetings to check on progress.

What are some of the first steps the committee needs to take to initiate the school grounds project? What do you want the school grounds to look like in one year?...two years?...five years?...ten years? What tasks, projects, or management needs to take place to reach those goals?

Feel free to dream. Many dreams may seem impossible for your district right now, but you’d be surprised how many districts are able to make their wildest dreams come true.

Create an Implementation Plan

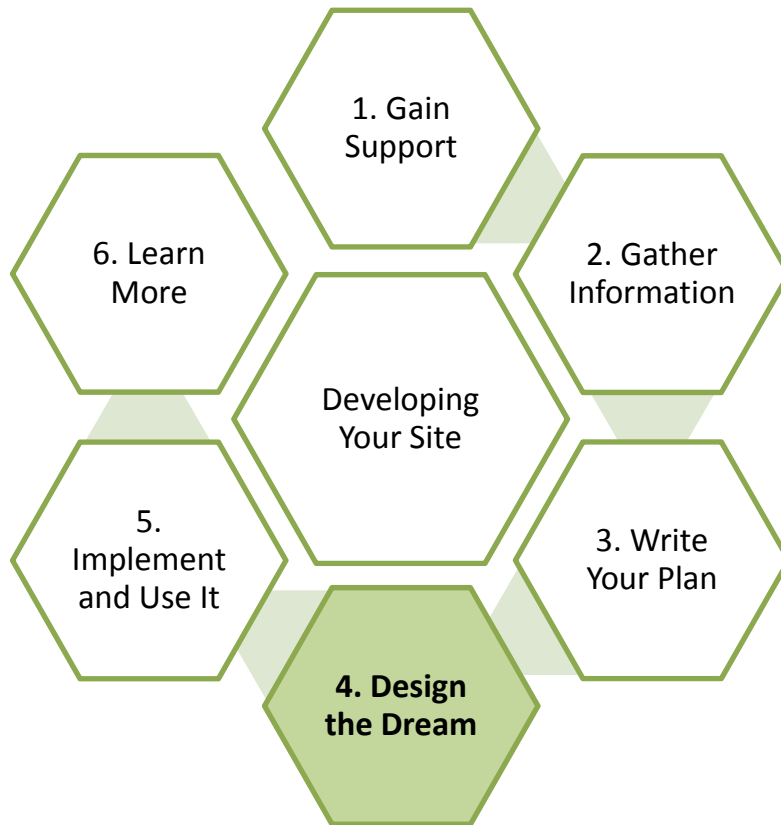
Now take those short term and long-range goals and develop a plan to fulfill them. Create a timeline to show how you plan to implement and fulfill each goal. Include key activities and resources (human and/or financial) needed to implement the specific components and goals.

Consider Maintenance

Care should be taken not to plan and implement more than can be maintained. Always compare maintenance and utilities costs to the budget, staff, and other resources available when planning site developments. For each part of your plan, list what will need to be done, how it will be accomplished, and who will need to do it. It might be helpful to make a schedule listing monthly, seasonal, and annual maintenance tasks.

Curriculum Connections

Review district and/or state academic standards. Take a critical look at the scope and sequence of instruction at each grade level. Look for concepts and standards that could be addressed outside on the school grounds. Indicate areas of current or potential curriculum development. Make general recommendations and identify a plan to create more detailed curriculum suggestions for each grade level to make good use of your new site.



4. Design the dream

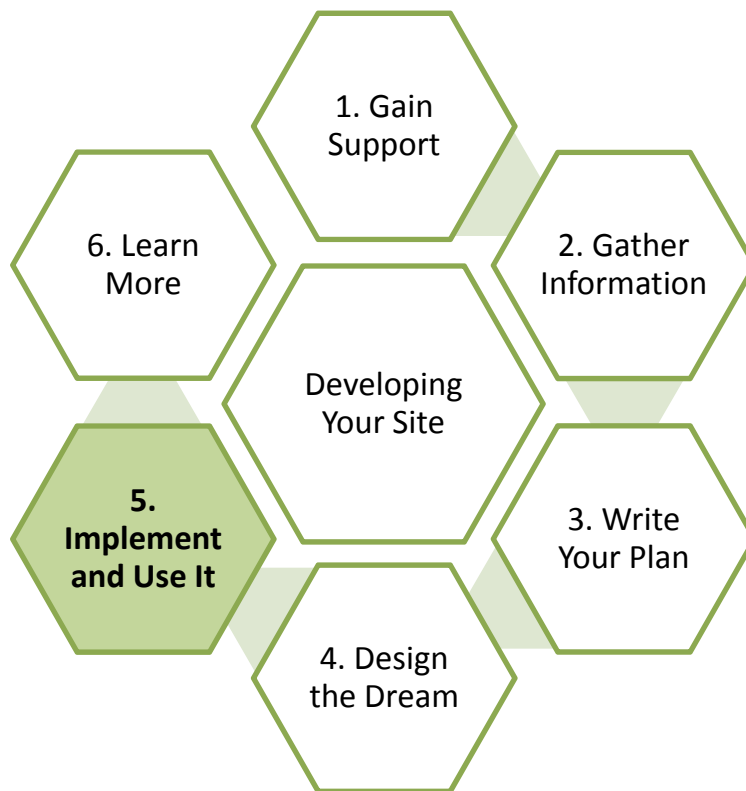
It's time to put your thoughts and ideas into a visual format. You have all the background work done and know what you want to do. Design your site to encompass as many of your great ideas as you can.

Draw It Out

A picture, or map, is worth a thousand words. Draw out your dream on paper or use an electronic landscape planning tool so that the ideas that have formed are easy for all to see and imagine. This also helps spot any issues that weren't obvious when reading descriptions (there just isn't room for all the things we'd like in that area.) This is a great place to use your art department or community members who may have experience in landscape management or graphic design.

Permits and Permissions

Be sure to check local zoning regulations and any deed restrictions on your property before you begin planning a building project. Your facility management staff will be able to help you with this.



5. Implement it and Use it

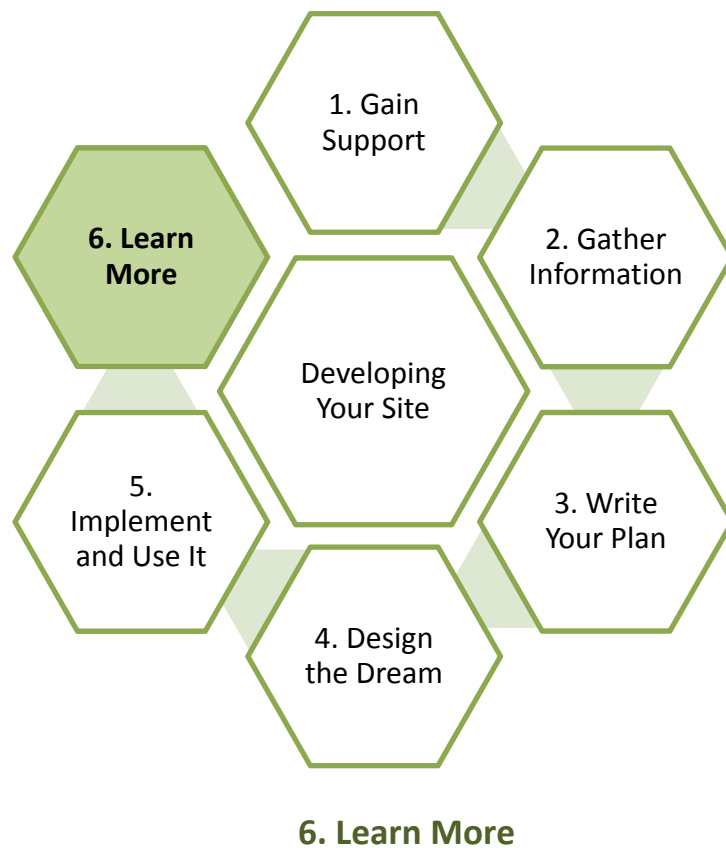
Don't stop now! Getting everything ready was the hard part.

Community Partnerships

If you've cultivated the community relationships, this is the time for them to shine. Does one of your parent group members have landscaping equipment? Are the Master Gardeners anxious to help you find the right plants for the butterfly garden? Does the local tree care business have tree nursery connections to get you large trees at cost? Does the art teacher have student projects planned that would be great in a sculpture garden?

Student Learning

Hopefully you've had student learning involved in all the steps of the process. Now you can really dive in and get learning outside. There are online and print resources for you to use. Potential for student learning is varied and rich. You will likely be fine-tuning this and finding new resources for years. Look at your current curriculum and ask yourself, "How could I teach this topic outside?"



Whew! The site is done, teachers are out with their students every week for a short lesson, and now you can relax. Sorry, that last part won't happen. Every new school year brings a new group of students into the outdoor classroom. Please remember that your site isn't "done" to them. They are seeing the site for the first time and learning about it is new for them. For all of the planners and implementers to continue to see the potential of a site, you need to keep learning. Look for professional development opportunities – conferences, workshops, classes, webinars, master gardener programs, books, websites, and on and on. If you don't know where to look, just ask. See what LEAF has to say, or the other Wisconsin Center for Environmental Education programs, or the EE in Wisconsin website. All can be great resources.

Find out what other schools are doing with their sites. Ask around, visit a few see what the LEAF website and EE in Wisconsin have to show you about other schools. We're here to help! leaf@uwsp.edu or 715-346-4956.

NOW KEEP GOING!



SCHOOL GROUNDS EDUCATOR NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The information collected with the Educator Needs Assessment will provide valuable insight on the opportunities and challenges of using the school grounds as an outdoor classroom. Please share your thoughts and opinions.

School Ground Site Use

1. Have you ever taken students outside on the school grounds to learn? ___yes ___no
If NO, what hinders you from using the school grounds?
2. Have noticed any other teachers conducting lessons with students outdoors on the school grounds?
If YES, who did you observe and what were they doing?
3. If you aren't currently using the school grounds as a teaching tool, do you have an interest in doing so? ___yes ___no
4. Did you ever encounter problems that prevented your use of the school grounds? ___yes ___no
If YES, what were the problems?
5. How might you use the school grounds to enhance your classroom instruction or other school-related activities?
6. Do you intend to use the school grounds this school year? ___yes ___no
If YES, how many times will you take students to the school grounds this year?
7. List 3 short term goals for utilizing your school grounds site during the next school year.



School Ground Use Logistics

8. Is there any special protocol for taking your classes outside on the school grounds for a lesson?



- Do you need special permission from administration? If so, who should you ask?
 - Is there anyone you need to coordinate your schedule with so that multiple classes aren't using the same school grounds site at the same time? If so, who?
9. Before doing any projects on the school site (such as putting up a bird feeder or planting a tree) who do you need to get permission from?
10. Do you know who the buildings and grounds supervisor is? If so, what questions would you need to ask him/her in order to successfully complete your project?
11. Please list any tools, resources, materials and equipment that you already use on the school grounds:
12. Please list any tools, resources, materials and equipment that you do not have but would enhance your lesson on the school grounds:

Professional Development

13. Do you need help identifying curriculum or developing lessons to use with your classes outside on the school grounds? yes no
14. Do you feel you have enough knowledge to effectively utilize the school grounds as an outdoor classroom? yes no
- What topics would you like to learn more about that would enhance your ability to teach outside on the school grounds?
15. Would you like to be involved in professional development opportunities that focus on using the school grounds as an outdoor classroom? yes no

Administration of the School Grounds Site

Do you know of other teachers who share a similar interest in using the school grounds as a teaching site? yes no
If yes, who?

Would you be willing to participate as a member on a school grounds committee that is focused on using the school site as an outdoor classroom? yes no





SCHOOL GROUNDS

FACILITY STAFF NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The information collected with the Facility Staff Needs Assessment will provide valuable insight on the opportunities and challenges of using the school grounds as an outdoor classroom. Please share your thoughts and opinions.

1. What benefits do you think can be achieved by using the school grounds to teach students?
2. What challenges do you think will arise if teachers take students outside to learn?
3. Are there areas on the school grounds that are currently difficult or time consuming to maintain?
yes no
If yes, what areas?
4. What do you recommend as the best location for outdoor gardens?
5. Are there areas that are off limits for development of gardens or plantings? (For instance because they are used for piling snow from plowing.) yes no
If yes, what areas and why?
6. Are you willing to share your knowledge of the site or about topics related to it directly with students? yes no
If yes, what information would you like to share?
7. Would you be willing to participate as a member on a school grounds committee that is focused on using the school site as an outdoor classroom? yes no



SCHOOL GROUNDS ADMINISTRATOR NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The information collected with the Administrator Needs Assessment will provide valuable insight on the opportunities and challenges of using the school grounds as an outdoor classroom. Please share your thoughts and opinions.

1. What goals do you have for outdoor learning?
2. Are there permission forms or procedures that staff should be aware of before they take their students outside? ___yes ___no
Please explain.
3. Are there financial resources available for developing an outdoor learning space on the school grounds?
___yes ___no
4. Would you support the School Grounds Committee in pursuing outside financial support in the form of grants or in kind donations? ___yes ___no
5. If a teacher wants to put up a bird feeder or plant a tree, who do they need to contact, what do they need to do?
6. Would it be possible to schedule staff development time to learn more about using the school site for teaching?



SCHOOL GROUNDS STUDENT NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Students should be involved in the planning of your outdoor classroom whenever possible. This is their site after all. The method you use to get input from your students will vary depending on their age and your project. It is likely best to consider student input after most of your basic planning is done and you have core ideas to offer to them. Once you are at that point, let their imaginations go!

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS AND TECHNIQUES

1. Show students a series of photos or video of different sites. This can be done as a whole school presentation or in individual classrooms.
2. Ask students to describe, draw, etc. their ideas as to what they want on their site.
3. Have each classroom come up with a single plan or idea and share that with the school.

Ask students questions such as:

- How do you like to play? (if you are creating something near play areas)
- What would you like your school ground to look like?
- What subjects would you like to learn about outside?
- How would you like to be involved?
- What would you like to name the area?



SCHOOL GROUNDS

PARENT & COMMUNITY MEMBER NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Remember that parents and community members will be great assets to your plan. You may want to ask these questions in a survey or maybe a community meeting with a brainstorming activity would be best.

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

- What benefits for your community do you see by creating an outdoor classroom?
- What would you like your school ground to look like?
- How would you like to be involved?
- Do you know someone else who could be helpful?
- What would you like to name the area?
- What concerns do you have?



SCHOOL GROUNDS

SITE INVENTORY

The School Grounds Site Inventory is a tool to assist in assessing opportunities for student learning on the school grounds. Using this tool will help identify strengths and needs of the existing school grounds and serve as a basis for setting priorities and planning enhancements and improvements to the site. It can also be used as a tool to help plan and design a new outdoor classroom for your school grounds.

Site Features

Take a walk around the outside of your school buildings to assess the school grounds and the features on your school site. Record observations below regarding the physical features of your site.

What are the most **prominent** features of the site?

Identify any **trees** you see on the site.

Identify any **shrubs** you see on the site.

Identify any **common plants** on your site.

Which **animals** or **evidence of animals** do you see?

What seems to be the most **unique** feature of the site?

What **human support** features or evidence exist on the outdoor site? (*power lines, heating/cooling, water removal, snow plow lanes, etc.*)

Are there any **special features** that should be protected or preserved?

In your opinion what are the three most **aesthetically pleasing** features of the site?

What feature is a **focal point** in which many **lessons** could be incorporated around?

Map-out your school grounds

Make a rough map of the school-site that shows the relative positions of the school building(s), parking lot, play areas, walkways, etc. Include on your map a directional orientation arrow, a rough scale and appropriate identification of significant features.

Estimate the percentages of the overall school grounds which are occupied by:	
School buildings	
Asphalt & concrete	
Grass	
Landscaped plant cover	
Natural plant cover	

Look for areas that are protected and unprotected from the natural elements.

- Where is the area least likely to be affected by sun, temperature and wind variations?
- Where is the area most likely to be affected by sun, temperature and wind variations?



Determine the approximate size of the specific school-site areas you wish to develop or enhance.

Is there a water source nearby? If so, do you have access?

Will your development or enhancement of this area result in conflict due to distracting others who are still inside the building during class time?

Site Use



What **major limitations** might deter the use of this site?

What **improvements** could be made on this site to address the limitations?

Should anything be **added** to or **removed from** the site to enhance its use?

What **subject areas or classes** does the outdoor site seem to best lend itself to?

What are the **target groups** you would recommend to use the site (i.e. grade levels, special classes or students, etc.)?

What concerns or issues might be addressed using specific features of the site as catalysts for **discovery investigation and critical thinking**?

Suggest at least one outdoor school-site activity that might be carried out in the following curriculum areas:

Fine Arts

Language Arts

Math

Music

Physical Education

Science

Social Studies

Other subjects:

What special **equipment, teaching aids, curriculum materials**, etc. might be recommended for use at the site?

Where does the major support come from in encouraging teachers to make greater use of the outdoor school site?

What types of **specialists** might be called in to do in-service training prior to using the site?

What are the three most valid reasons for using this site?



Rank this site on a 1 -10 scale according to its overall potential for taking classes outside to learn.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



SCHOOL GROUNDS DETAILED SITE INVENTORY

School Site Physical Features

Note the location, type, and size of any of the following:

- ✓ Parking lots and sidewalks
- ✓ Buildings
- ✓ Utilities and services– Where are the utilities located? Are they overhead or underground? Are there containers for garbage disposal and recycling?
- ✓ Outdoor facilities – Are there outdoor seating areas, picnic tables, or benches?
- ✓ Play equipment – Are there playground structures or ball fields?
- ✓ Fences – Are there fences around the land or gates over entrance roads? Is the area always accessible?
- ✓ Places of beauty – Are there any “WOW!” spots on the school grounds that should be preserved because they are especially beautiful or inspirational?
- ✓ Landscaping

Topographical Features

Describe the overall lay of the land by noting the following:

- ✓ General topography – Is the land flat, rolling, and/or steep?
- ✓ Elevation – Are there dry uplands and/or low wetlands?
- ✓ Slopes – Are slopes steep or gentle? What are the aspects (directions) of the slopes?
- ✓ Drainage – What direction does water flow on the site? Are there ditches, gullies, or streams?
- ✓ Safety concerns – Are there any dangerous places on the school site?

Geological Features

Explore the geology and soils of your school site by looking for the following:

- ✓ Bedrock – Is the bedrock exposed anywhere on the land?
- ✓ Soil thickness – Use a soil auger to determine the presence and thickness of the topsoil, subsoil, and parent material in several locations.
- ✓ Soil type – Describe the texture, color, and composition of the soil.

Living things

Collect information about the plants present on the site. To get a complete listing, you will need to inventory the site many times throughout the year. Look for:

- ✓ Native trees, shrubs, vines, wildflowers, grasses, aquatic plants, mosses, and ferns – Compile a listing. Ask for help from a forester or other resource specialists
- ✓ Landscape plantings – Are there landscape or ornamental plants around buildings or in other areas?
- ✓ Invasive plants – Make note of the identification and locations of invasive plant species. For a complete list of state invasive species, check out the WDNR-Bureau of Endangered Resources website at <http://dnr.wi.gov/invasives>.
- ✓ Hazardous plants – Are there any plants such as poison ivy, poison sumac, wild parsnip, or stinging nettle that could cause problems? Are there any hazardous trees (i.e., trees in danger of losing large branches or falling over) in areas where people will be walking or learning?
- ✓ Animals – Mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, mollusks, insects, and other animals. Indicate on the list where each animal is found. Some animals live their whole lives in a small area; others may only pass through once a year. Your only record of some animals may be footprints, scat, or other clues they have left behind. Inventory at different seasons and different times of the day.
- ✓ Algae, fungi, molds, lichens, mushrooms and other things that are strange, yet wonderful!