

# Outdoor Classroom Learning

by Wendy Nadherny Fachon

Through the Learning Inside Out Outdoor Classroom Initiative, the Rhode Island Department of Education recently awarded \$7.5 million to support outdoor education, including many new and expanded school garden projects. Eighty-nine projects across 29 local education agencies (LEAs) will receive grants to create, enhance and support access to natural resources for all students through outdoor classrooms or schoolyard habitats. These projects will build collaborations between community partners so that many more students will have opportunities to learn about environmental and food literacy in exciting outdoor experiential learning spaces.

## Outdoor Learning Space Design

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service published the *Schoolyard Habitat Project Guide* to help LEAs and community green teams transform school grounds into places that engage the entire school community in habitat restoration. It supports a national movement dedicated to developing a citizenry that consciously values its environment. The document will lead school communities through each step of the process: planning, installing and sustaining a project that is most suitable each school site.

## Academic Integration of Environmental Literacy

A commitment to Learning Inside Out means adjusting the existing curriculum and using the school as a hands-on laboratory to integrate environmental and sustainability concepts and activities into science, math, civics, language arts, technology and elective courses. “We know that teachers in Rhode Island overwhelmingly want to engage their students in environmental education and in outdoor learning spaces,” says Jeanine Silversmith, executive director of



the Rhode Island Environmental Education Association (RIEEA). “They understand that it provides meaningful learning experiences, integrates real-world experiences into the student experience and leads to positive academic, social-emotional and health outcomes.”

## Professional Development

This effort will require teacher training in environmental content and outdoor teaching strategies. RIEEA provides teacher professional development (PD) programs, as well as a searchable *Environmental Education Directory*, where teachers can find PD opportunities and teaching resources offered by RIEEA’s many member organizations. “Professional development is essential in preparing teachers to implement environmental education practices that are aligned with the standards,” adds Silversmith. “Luckily, Rhode Island has dozens upon dozens of organizations that are exceptionally skilled at delivering high-quality professional development to educators.”

One exciting example of this is the Northern Rhode Island Forest School, a newly emerging outdoor learning program founded by Diana Brennan and Lindsey Baillarger.

After earning a B.S. in environmental science, Brennan worked as a wetland scientist for the past 20 years. She brings a deep understanding of Rhode Island’s natural resources, to which she has added a certification as a Level 3 Forest School Leader through Forest Schools Education, an internationally recognized program that offers both in-person and online training.

Baillarger, who taught English in middle and high school classrooms for 14 years, earned her master’s in English from Harvard University and is currently pursuing her second master’s degree to become a K-12 reading specialist. During the pandemic, she took her students outside for classes, and after observing positive behavioral and academic outcomes, she left her teaching position to train as a Level 1 Forest School Assistant. Highly conscious of Rhode Island’s literacy crisis, as demonstrated by the low-test scores among third graders and exacerbated by pandemic measures, Baillarger joined Brennan and created the Literacy in the Leaves program.

As outdoor classrooms continue to emerge, students of all ages will be able to learn outdoors through the live observation and experience of real-world connections, instead of just sitting inside and reading disengaged texts in books. The proof will become evident in future data.

*Wendy Nadherny Fachon is a member of RIEEA and hosts the Story Walking Radio Hour. Download her podcast Forest School Learning, in which she interviews Diana Brennan and Lindsey Baillarger, founders of the Northern Rhode Island Forest School. Find it at [NetWalkRI.com/podcasts](http://NetWalkRI.com/podcasts).*

### Learn more at:

- **School Habitat Project Guide**  
[fws.gov/media/schoolyard-habitat-project-guide](http://fws.gov/media/schoolyard-habitat-project-guide)
- **RIEEA Environmental Education Directory**  
[RIEEA.org/resources/environmental-education-directory](http://RIEEA.org/resources/environmental-education-directory)
- **Northern Rhode Island Forest School**  
[NRIForestSchool.com](http://NRIForestSchool.com)