

# THE GREAT OUTDOORS

Fresh air catalyzes fresh approaches to teaching and learning.



In September, the Independence community celebrated the culmination of three years of planning, fundraising, and hard work with the opening of the school's new outdoor classroom. The project reimagined a former Early Childhood playground as a 57,000-square-foot educational space with 14 distinct areas for music, art, movement, building, performances, and more. The design even includes a section where children can work with "messy materials."

Reaction has been energetic and unanimously positive. This engaging new space pulls children toward it with a magnetic power and instantly immerses them in active, collaborative, open-ended exploration.

The outdoor classroom is an important success in itself, but is also part of something bigger: a multi-dimensional commitment to making learning at Independence an experience that transcends our building. In other words, this new teaching and learning space is actually just one corner within a far larger outdoor classroom: the 90-acre expanse of the Independence campus.



## An Unexpected Year

The school's interest in outdoor learning is not new. In fact, Independence committed to the idea of exploring outdoor opportunities in its 2011 Strategic Plan.

"We realized we have all this land and began asking why we weren't doing more with it," explains Head of School Vicky Yatzus. "You can have a treasure at your doorstep and miss its potential."

That Strategic Plan led to the school's highly successful partnership with the Stroud Water Research Center. Then came the idea for the outdoor classroom, with the understanding that this would be part of a larger initiative. Before that could take shape, however, a disruption on a historical scale arrived in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Suddenly, we were learning outside not because it represented a breakthrough in approach," says Yatzus, "but to help keep our students distanced and safe." The pandemic took what had been a thoughtful evolution in education and radically accelerated it. However, unlike virtually every other twist the pandemic brought, this was a good thing.

"As we found ourselves outside more and more, the benefits became more and more clear," says Spanish and French teacher Josée Spence. "What a silver lining this proved to be."

## Stream-Jumping and Shakespeare in the Barn

So what does learning look like when you export it from four-walled classrooms to tents, lawns, woodsy clearings, and creek sides? It turns out it takes many and varied forms.

Sometimes, says Spence, it's acquiring basic Spanish vocabulary, but with a twist. "The words for what you see around you are not 'window,' 'door,' and 'white board,' but 'grass,' 'sky,' and 'bug.'"

Sometimes, says English teacher Kevin McDonald, it's reading scenes from "Romeo and Juliet" or "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in the atmospheric ruins of the Great Barn on campus.

Sometimes it's a lab experiment without the lab, explains science teacher Hannah Pretz: "Studying chemical changes with baking soda and vinegar—and choosing the location carefully to avoid the risk that any spills or runoff would be harmful."

And sometimes it's creek-jumping. Yes, first-grade teacher Barb Annable explains, her students find the challenge of leaping back and forth across the campus tributary exhilarating and addictive. "Each child has a different comfort level with the risk, so they'll choose a point where the creek is a little wider or narrower. Some kids who are very cautious and watchful at first end up getting totally into it."

Teachers describe the joy that comes from venturing outside, a lightening of students' spirits—and not just when they are jumping across creeks.

"It boosts my mood and the kids', too," says Annable.

"I find I can keep my students excited and attentive longer," says Pretz.

"They are much more focused," says Spence.

Teachers describe other benefits as well: more teacher-student bonding, in the casual walks from inside to outdoors; more ownership, as students help lug experimental materials outside and decide where and how to set them up; and more simplicity, as some of the technology and props of indoor learning are left behind for a while and teachers and students focus in on the essential.

"I would also say 'more noticing,'" says kindergarten teacher Barb Scarpone. "The children noticed insects all around and began asking about them and searching for them. They wondered what we could find under rocks. And their curiosity pulled the curriculum in a new, unplanned direction. We started exploring this topic that the children were fascinated by in a substantive way."

Another unanticipated outcome was that a year spent largely outside left students and teachers feeling more hardy.

"In past years, I might have thought to take my class outside only if it was the most perfect sunny 74-degree day," says Spence. "Now, mud and drizzle mean nothing to us. Unless it's unbearably frigid, who cares?"

## According to the Research

Recognizing that the school's adventure in outdoor learning represented a potentially valuable educational innovation, the leadership team of the school's Center for Wellness, Innovation, and Learning (CWIL) decided it was important to study the experience in a methodical way. They commissioned an expert team from Stroud Water Research Center and Millersville University to look in-depth at the recent experiences of students and teachers, analyze their findings, and offer recommendations.

"It's one thing to say being outside is great; it's another to have the data," says Yatzus. "We now have the data."

The researchers looked at topics ranging from student comfort levels with outdoor learning to changing interest in STEM fields (which increased). Perhaps their most conclusive finding, however, was a validation of a core insight shared by Independence teachers: outdoor learning makes students happy. In fact, 99% of Independence students surveyed said so.

"In a year of COVID-19-induced anxiety, disruption, and stress, it's difficult to overstate how important this finding is," says Yatzus.

In addition to benefits they categorized as "personal and emotional," the researchers found outdoor learning also increased "engagement, focus, and creativity," a point they note aligns with other research on this topic. Students, they found, were not just happy, but also academically productive.





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## Up Next

Given the level of enthusiasm for outdoor learning, it seems certain to be a part of the school's evolution going forward. Independence educators are committed to making the most of their time outdoors—to taking an experience that happened suddenly because of COVID-19 and transforming it into an intentional part of their pedagogy.

To this end, the school has formed an Outdoor Initiatives Committee. Among its charges: to focus on professional development to support faculty in teaching outside and to explore curriculum mapping, finding concepts and topics in each subject area that can be truly enhanced by outdoor learning.

"This is key," says Yatzus. "It's not just relocation—going outside to teach exactly the same lesson we might teach inside. It's using the outdoors to develop the skills we need to in a creative and intentional way."

She also points to another key goal going forward: to translate learning in the natural world into caring for the natural world. "An essential part of our school's mission is to educate engaged citizens and leaders. When it comes to our environment and the tremendous challenges we face, that means preparing environmental stewards and activists, young people equipped to make a difference. This is a priority we are weaving into the curriculum at every level."

## A 90-Acre Treasure

Few schools are fortunate enough to enjoy a campus as expansive and beautiful as The Independence School's. These 90 acres are full of wonders: multiple streams and a wetland area, all part of the Pike Creek watershed; wooded trails; the beautiful shell of the Great Barn; a giant fallen sycamore first graders love to climb and have nicknamed Big Ben. There are also the living wonders, glimpsed by day but more often captured by motion-activated camera at night—the foxes, deer, racoons, and owls.

The land is rich with history as well, ready to be brought to life. For generations, the property belonged to the Eastburn family, who farmed much of it. They also burned lime; the remains of a worked-out quarry are still found on the grounds. Long before the Eastburns, local Native Americans were known to inhabit the area. In plowing their fields, later farmers often turned up arrowheads.

This special property came into the school's possession in several installments. The first 16 acres, the site of the original building, were acquired in 1981. Then, in 1986, the school launched a major fundraising effort, the *80 Acres Campaign*, to secure much of the rest, largely to ensure it would not be developed. Finally, Katherine Eastburn, a member of the school's Board of Trustees, donated her property to the campus, a parcel that included a farmhouse which has since burned down.

The campus as we know it is the result of a combination of committed effort and deep generosity—a legacy to be preserved, cherished, and most importantly, well used.



# Outdoor Learning— *As Students See It*

Tim Mao — 8th Grade

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The saying goes that for every cloud, there is a silver lining. The silver lining of the COVID-19 pandemic was definitely outdoor learning!

Outdoor education is very different from traditional learning, yet it yields many benefits. For me, the simple change of scenery was the best part. It also helped me connect with nature, which was crucial for studying environmental science. Instead of reading about organisms that live in freshwater, we were catching them in the creek and then studying what we found! Outdoor learning offered so many opportunities to study nature firsthand, and I hope it continues for years to come!



Sophie Crain — 8th Grade

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"Grab your campstool and your clipboard!" our teachers would announce, alerting us that the lesson would be outside.

It turns out that outdoor learning created a less stressful environment, and the outdoor breaks during the school day were something that really helped me reset my focus.

From wearing waders in the creek or walking through the wetlands to working on grammar games and vocabulary in English, or even doing math outdoors using whiteboards, Indy took down the classroom walls by creating an outdoor learning space. Being outside while we learned allowed us to stay safer from COVID-19, reduced our overall stress, and was simply more fun.



Jai Thacker — 8th grade

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I hope this never ends.

I'm not talking about the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm talking about outdoor learning.

Simply put, learning outdoors is fun. For example, to prepare for a vocabulary quiz, we would play a game in my English class. Inside, not everyone participated. However, when we went outside, everyone joined in and had a lot of fun. We also learned our definitions faster and better than we had inside. My friends and I were happier and more willing to participate, which led to better academic performance.

Outdoor learning has been a great experience, and while I hope the COVID-19 pandemic ends soon, I hope outdoor learning is here to stay.

Zhara Waters — 8th Grade

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The warm sun gently peeks through the tree branches and kisses my paper, and my hair is illuminated by the amber glow. The weather is gorgeous, causing me to rub the sleepiness of the weekend from my eyes.

Why learn vocabulary by reading from a book illuminated by fluorescent lights when you could go outside and play a creative game with classmates underneath a clear blue sky?

Over the last two years, every class memory that matters to me has happened outside. Outdoor learning has made me realize just how lovely our campus is, and it is something I hope Independence continues even after I have moved on to high school.