

ASSEMBLY THIRD READING
AB 2158 (Hoover and Lowenthal)
As Amended April 13, 2026
Majority vote

SUMMARY

Requires the California Department of Education (CDE) to establish, manage, and evaluate the Statewide Outdoor Learning Pilot Program, and publish statewide guidance on outdoor learning.

Major Provisions

- 1) Defines outdoor learning as instructional activities occurring in outdoor settings, including but not limited to schoolyards, gardens, campuses, green spaces, community spaces, local parks, public lands, outdoor environmental educational facilities, coastal and watershed areas, and other natural or built environments.
- 2) Requires the CDE, on or before July 1, 2028, and in consultation with county offices of education (COEs), classroom educators, tribal partners, environmental literacy experts, and outdoor learning community organizations, to publish statewide guidance on outdoor learning that includes the following:
 - a) Best practices for delivering standards-aligned instruction in outdoor settings;
 - b) Safety and risk management considerations;
 - c) Strategies to ensure equitable access for unduplicated students;
 - d) Models for enhancing outdoor learning environments on school sites; and
 - e) Strategies for partnering with community-based organizations, park agencies, tribes, and outdoor education providers;
- 3) Establishes a three-year Statewide Outdoor Learning Pilot Program, subject to an appropriation. Requires the program to include six pilot sites, each of which includes an LEA and community-based outdoor learning provider, and which represent diverse statewide locations, community types, grade spans, and program models. Requires the pilot to:
 - a) Investigate the effectiveness of outdoor learning in improving student outcomes, including attendance, engagement, academic achievement, environmental literacy, mental and physical health, and natural resources-related careers.
 - b) Gather statewide evidence to inform future legislative and budgetary decisions;
 - c) Support partnerships between LEAs and community-based outdoor learning providers; and
 - d) Prioritize implementation in unduplicated pupils, and in communities historically underserved or disproportionately burdened by environmental harms.

- 4) Requires the CDE to, on or before December 31 of the final year of the Pilot Program, publish a final report summarizing outcomes and recommendations for statewide expansion of outdoor learning to its website.
- 5) Authorizes the CDE to provide resources to address the particular needs of LEAs in delivering outdoor learning, subject to an appropriation.
- 6) Authorizes funds appropriated for the pilot program to be used for program implementation, coordination, and evaluation; communications with grantees or other stakeholders; site visits; and statewide learning community activities.

COMMENTS

What is outdoor learning? Outdoor learning is a broad term that refers to educational activities that occur in or make use of outdoor settings. On its website, the CDE offers the following examples of outdoor learning:

- 1) Service-learning projects;
- 2) School and community garden projects;
- 3) Recycling Clubs;
- 4) Schoolyard habitat restoration/creation;
- 5) Interdisciplinary project-based learning;
- 6) Campus and community improvements;
- 7) Schoolyard tree planting projects;
- 8) Local ecosystem support; and
- 9) Field trips.

Benefits of outdoor learning. A systematic review of 147 research studies found that outdoor learning, broadly defined, provided the following benefits:

- 1) Increased student engagement and ownership of their learning;
- 2) Some evidence of academic improvement;
- 3) Development of social and collaborative skills; and
- 4) Improved self-concept factors. (Mann et al. 2022)

On its website, the CDE has cited additional research confirming the benefits of outdoor learning, including opportunities for students to engage in teambuilding, access to nature, student well-being, and scientific knowledge (Finn et al. 2018; Ming et al. 2018; Chawla 2015; and American Institutes for Research, 2005).

One challenge in identifying the benefits of outdoor learning is that the term encompasses a wide variety of instructional interventions. For example, a one-time field trip to a local park requires different resources and will generate different outcomes than yearlong instruction utilizing a school garden, but both are equally defined as outdoor learning. Research that compares the benefits of different types of outdoor learning (e.g., field trips vs. community projects) would help ensure that state dollars are used as efficiently and effectively as possible.

Existing resources for outdoor learning. The CDE maintains a website dedicated to outdoor learning environments, which provides guidance for LEAs looking to create or expand outdoor learning programs. Additionally, the website lists numerous free resources to facilitate outdoor learning, including materials from Green Schoolyards America; the *Outdoors for All: Providing Equitable Access to Parks and Nature* California initiative; the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Schoolyard Habitat Guide; and the California Green Ribbon Schools Awards program, which honors schools who demonstrate excellence in resource efficiency, health and wellness, and environmental and sustainability education.

According to the Author

Outdoor learning is a commonsense, research-backed approach that helps reduce excessive screen time, improve student well-being, and support stronger academic outcomes. At a time when our kids are spending more hours than ever on screens, this bill gives schools a practical way to help students reconnect with the natural world while strengthening their focus and academic success. AB 2158 provides the guidance needed to create real change for our students.

Arguments in Support

According to the nonprofit organization Ten Strands, "Outdoor learning is a research-based, cost-effective solution to many of the challenges California students face today. Time spent learning outdoors improves students' attention and concentration, strengthens social and emotional development, decreases stress and behavioral challenges, and increases academic performance. Outdoor learning also provides meaningful, structured alternatives to screen time, helping students reconnect with peers, educators, and their communities.

The bill builds on the foundation of SB 720 (Allen, 2018), preserves local control, creates no new curriculum mandates, and clarifies that outdoor environments can serve as powerful instructional settings across subjects."

Arguments in Opposition

None on file.

FISCAL COMMENTS

According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee, "Minor and absorbable costs to the CDE to develop additional outdoor learning guidance beyond what it currently provides. One-time Proposition 98 General Fund cost pressures of an unknown amount, likely in the low millions to high millions of dollars, for the Legislature to appropriate funding for the three-year pilot program. The Legislative Analyst's Office recently warned of General Fund structural deficits of around \$35 billion per year in the 2027-28 fiscal year and ongoing."

VOTES

ASM EDUCATION: 9-0-0

YES: Patel, Hoover, Alvarez, Bonta, Castillo, Garcia, Lowenthal, Pellerin, Zbur

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 15-0-0

YES: Wicks, Hoover, Aguiar-Curry, Calderon, Caloza, Dixon, Fong, Mark González, Krell, Pacheco, Pellerin, Sharp-Collins, Solache, Ta, Tangipa

UPDATED

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