

**Reengaging During a Pandemic:
Building an Outdoor Classroom**

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Key words: dropout prevention, school climate, reengage, attendance, new environments, CTE

Funding Sources:

Gulf Coast RC&D Council, Inc. grant for \$10,000

Project Cost and Budget Narrative:

- 1 20x40 Semi-permanent tent - \$3,346.00
- 2 portable rolling dry erase boards - \$197.11
- 20 outdoor convertible bench/tables - \$3,831.11
- 4 10x10 portable outdoor tents - \$359.96
- 5 water bottle filling stations - \$2,337.95

Total spent: \$10,072.13

Project Description:

The goal of creating a portable, outdoor classroom setting is to decrease behavioral recidivism, improve students' physical, mental, and emotional health, and improve personal development. CTE students set up and take down the equipment, making it "their own" and giving them a sense of ownership.

Staffing Pattern:

Teachers sign up for times/days to use the classroom. Our CTE students will assemble the classroom in the location the teacher requests.

Population Served:

At-risk students in a rural community high school of south Alabama. It has a diverse population of African American, Native American, and white students.

Project Origination:

A grant written, and project was organized by January Taylor, with approval of the CHS administrative team.

Issues Addressed:

- The outdoor classroom will address the following issues that our leadership team has identified: school connectedness
- culture
- attendance.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:

The desired outcome of an outdoor classroom is to appeal to multiple learning styles and increase students' motivation to attend and participate in school. Measurements will include outdoor classroom use logs, school attendance reports, and behavior reports.

Strategies and/or Interventions of the Project:

Instead of students being crowded into classrooms with poor air circulation, children are getting fresh (and safer) air. Think of a school that places classes of students and their educators near available campus greenery - gardens, trees, and more. Such access to nature could help their mood, reduce stress, improve their ability to concentrate, and increase their overall sense of well-being.

Teachers at Citronelle High School will receive instructions on how to reserve the outdoor classroom along with strategies on how the outdoor classroom can support their objectives using differentiation. Teachers will use the outdoor classroom to provide behavior intervention support.

Results (Outcomes and Achievements):

One outcome of using an outdoor classroom is increased student performance. There is an extensive series of studies that indicate that spending time in nature, particularly spending time learning outdoors about nature, supports improved academic performance in children regardless of subject. (<https://www.nwf.org/-/media/Documents/PDFs/NWF-Reports/2020/COVID-19-Outdoor-Classroom-Policy-Guide>).

Changing the landscape of the classroom will help us reach the following achievements:

- Building confidence: informal and less structured outdoor learning means children learn to control their own actions.
- Creativity and imagination: with outdoor learning, children can think more freely, design their own activities, and approach the world in inventive ways.
- Responsibility: children learn to take care of and care for the environment.
- Physical movement: some GPS studies show that kids outdoors move twice as much without disrupting the typical classroom environment as much.
- Reduced stress and fatigue: in natural environments, we practice an effortless type of attention known as soft fascination that creates feelings of pleasure, not fatigue.
- Friendships: creative interactions with other children involve negotiating rules, winning agreement on strategies, and celebrating results with team members.
- ADHD relief: A study from the University of Illinois compared the ability of children with ADHD symptoms to concentrate after a 20-minute walk in three settings. They found that when the children walked through a park-like setting there was a significant boost in their ability to concentrate. In comparison, they did not reap the same benefits from a walk in a city area or a residential area.

Project Timeline:

One school year

Outcomes Related to School Completion, Dropout Prevention, and/or Graduation Rates:

According to Attendanceworks.org, students often cited the following reasons for dropping out of high school: lack of personal motivation or interest and lack of academic success. Our overall goal is to help students see the benefits of attendance and completion by providing students with opportunities that reinforce a sense of ownership and increase the school culture. All of these varied factors work together to improve student performance, increase daily attendance, decrease dropout rates and increase graduation rates.

Current Status of Project:

Near completion, we are currently able to use all the benches, small tents, portable white boards, and water filling stations. While we are waiting for the delivery of the largest tent, we have seen about 50 % of our staff utilize the parts we have.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:

I served as the planner and organizer of the project.

Lessons Learned:

There are some potential downsides to the use of outdoor classrooms. Weather in the south is often unpredictable. Feverish temperatures and rain are a few challenges we have faced.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:

Research the best spaces on campus to assemble and hold outdoor classroom spaces before ordering equipment. Survey teachers and students to see what needs they feel need to be met as far as building an outdoor space.