

Reimagining Learning Outdoors: How Active Outdoor Play-Based Learning (AOPL) Supports Student Growth and Academic Success

A Policy Brief for District Leaders and Educational Policymakers

Executive Summary

Active Outdoor Play-Based Learning (AOPL) is an evidence-based educational approach that integrates active play, outdoor environments, and academic goals. It supports not only curricular learning but also students' physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development. This brief presents practical insights from a systematic review of 21 empirical studies (2008–2024) on AOPL implementation in formal school settings, offering guidance for systems-level investment and policy alignment.

AOPL is a pedagogical strategy that uses play and the outdoors as meaningful contexts for learning. When embedded into school culture, AOPL offers a scalable and cost-effective way to advance curricular goals while also supporting whole-child development. Teachers who implement AOPL build connections between mandated curriculum and students' natural curiosity while leveraging the benefits of being outside¹.

This paper highlights actionable strategies and compelling outcomes that can inform policy, funding priorities, and district-wide implementation.

Why AOPL Matters for Districts and Systems

Academic Growth

- Supports literacy, math, science, and reasoning^{2,3}
- Fosters the development of 21st-century skills (critical thinking, problem solving, etc.)^{4,5}
- Aligns with and enhances curriculum goals^{6,7}

Social-Emotional Growth

- Builds confidence, resilience, and self-regulation^{8,9}
- Strengthens cooperation and communication^{10,11}

Physical Well-Being

- Promotes motor development, coordination, and movement skills^{7,12}
- Encourages safe risk-taking and physical confidence^{13,14}

Environmental Awareness

- Builds connection to nature and place^{15,16}
- Encourages environmental responsibility and stewardship^{17,18}

These outcomes align with district goals related to academic achievement, student well-being, and engagement, particularly in light of recent priorities around equity, mental health, and active learning.

The Educator's Role

AOPL blends curricular learning with playful exploration in outdoor spaces. Teachers are not passive observers; instead, they:

- Facilitate both guided and free play with academic purpose^{7,19}
- Connect outdoor experiences to classroom learning^{5,20}
- Use observation and student interests to scaffold learning^{3,4}

When supported with time, training, and flexible environments, educators are well-positioned to use AOPL to meet standards while fostering deeper engagement.

District-Level Considerations for Implementation

- Start small—leverage existing outdoor spaces such as courtyards, sidewalks, or gardens
- Encourage grade-level or cross-disciplinary teams to co-plan outdoor lessons
- Invest in versatile materials: clipboards, chalk, magnifying glasses, etc.
- Promote reflective student practices such as journaling and discussion
- Provide sustained professional development on outdoor learning and play-based strategies
- Clearly communicate the academic goals and whole-child benefits of AOPL to families, school boards, and other stakeholders

Policy Recommendations for Educational Leaders

- *Embed outdoor learning in curriculum frameworks:* Encourage integration of AOPL across core subjects, such as science and literacy^{3,20}
- *Enhance outdoor infrastructure:* Invest in biodiverse and flexible school grounds such as gardens, tree-shaded areas, and naturalized play zones^{2,15}
- *Reinforce AOPL's academic value:* Establish designated time for outdoor curriculum that extends beyond recess
- *Support professional learning:* Fund ongoing, embedded PD focused on outdoor classroom management, curriculum alignment, and assessment in AOPL²¹
- *Evaluate impact holistically:* Support schools in collecting both qualitative and quantitative evidence of impact, including academic achievement, student voice, engagement, well-being, and teacher observations

Final Thoughts

In an era when schools are tasked with improving academic outcomes while also supporting mental health and equitable learning experiences, AOPL offers a practical and research-supported path forward. It meets multiple district priorities without requiring costly programs or major infrastructure.

Outdoor play-based learning isn't a luxury or an add-on. It's an evidence-backed strategy that fosters innovative, inclusive, and developmentally rich learning environments. District leaders can play a key role in creating the conditions for AOPL to thrive.

Want to Learn More?

The full research synthesis was conducted by the following authors: Steph N. Dean, Peter Bakalár, David W. Chorney, Peter Kačúr, Summer Landreth, Dani M. Larson, & Megan Zeni. The synthesis included 21 empirical studies and outlines detailed outcomes and implementation strategies. If you'd like to view the full manuscript to explore how AOPL might look in your district, reach out to Steph Dean at sndean@clemson.edu.

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