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## Nature Preschools Continue Rapid Expansion Across United States

***Nature Preschools Are Expanding Across the United States and Spending More Time Outdoors, but Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Children and Educators Participating in Nature Preschools Persist***

**[Washington, D.C., May 30, 2023]** — Preschools in which children play and learn outside for the majority of the school day—called nature preschools—are continuing to rapidly expand across the United States, according to new research from the Natural Start Alliance, a project of the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE). The report, [\*Nature Preschools in the United States: 2022 Survey\*](#), indicates that in the 2022–23 school year, there were an estimated 800 nature preschools in the U.S. serving 25,600 children.

Schools are most concentrated in the Northeast, with Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont leading the country with the most nature preschools per capita. States with the most total nature preschools are California, Washington, and Minnesota. Notably, northern states with cold winter temperatures are some of the most likely to be home to preschools where children learn outside most of the day. The Natural Start Alliance’s Director, Christy Merrick, says that “Nature preschools are demonstrating that when outdoor learning is a priority, it can be done safely throughout the school year, including through winter.”

Research also indicates that nature preschools are spending a larger percentage of their school day outdoors compared to five years ago, when they were last surveyed. An estimated 240 preschools in the U.S. conduct their entire school day outdoors. Called outdoor preschools, these programs often struggle to be licensed. Licensing systems in the United States generally require fully equipped indoor spaces, even if those spaces are rarely or never used. Without licensing, programs must restrict their hours and the number of children they serve, and cannot access public funds for pre-K education, limiting who can access these programs.

Several states, however, are moving to update licensing requirements to allow for outdoor learning. Washington became the first state to permanently license outdoor preschools in 2021,

Maryland passed legislation this spring, Colorado is pursuing a new outdoor preschool licensing option for the 2023–24 school year, and legislation is pending in Oregon.

These are welcome developments because the 2022 survey of nature preschools suggests that access to and participation in nature preschools is not equally available to every child today. Survey data reveal that children who are Black or Latino are less likely to enroll in nature preschools, while children who are White are more likely, and this trend has not improved significantly since 2017. The racial and ethnic makeup of educators in nature preschools mirrors that of children. Licensing outdoor preschools to bring more public funding to outdoor education is an important step in leveling the playing field for families, but more research is needed to explore how to bring more diversity to nature preschools.

To promote continued, and more equitable, growth in nature preschools, the Natural Start Alliance calls for licensing outdoor preschools, along with more support for professional training and professional networks for nature-based educators. Because nature preschools are leading the way in demonstrating the effectiveness of early childhood nature-based education, continued growth in these programs can help shift our systems to bring the benefits of nature-based education into every program, for every child.

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### **About the Natural Start Alliance**

The Natural Start Alliance is a project of the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE). NAAEE supports environmental education in North America and around the world, and the Natural Start Alliance provides focus for this work in the early childhood years. In particular, the Natural Start Alliance supports early childhood educators in incorporating nature-based education into their teaching and programs, and advocates for nature-based education that is safe, effective, and inclusive. For more information, visit [naturalstart.org](https://naturalstart.org).

### **About NAAEE**

For more than five decades, the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) has served as the professional association, champion, and backbone organization for the field of environmental education (EE), working with EE professionals across United States, Canada, and Mexico, as well as globally, to advance environmental literacy and civic engagement to create a more equitable and sustainable future. For more information on NAAEE, visit <https://naaee.org>.