

Media Contact:

Name: Christy Merrick, Director, Natural Start Alliance

Phone: 801-230-9692

Email: christymerrick@gmail.com

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Nature preschools, outdoor preschools continue impressive growth across US

Report reveals outdoor, nature-focused preschools have grown 25-fold over the past decade

Washington, DC (July 7, 2020) – A new report, released this week by the Natural Start Alliance, a project of the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE), documents the rapid expansion of nature preschools in the United States. In nature preschools, children spend a majority of the school day learning outdoors in nature-rich environments. The report follows up on a 2017 publication that estimated 275 programs in the United States. Three years later, that number has more than doubled to an estimated 585 programs, or a 25-fold increase over the past decade.

The report, *Nature-Based Preschools in the US: 2020 Snapshot*, makes the case for nature in young children’s education, pointing to the many benefits ranging from improved academic performance to increased physical activity to stress relief. Research shows that children who attend nature preschools enter kindergarten just as prepared as their peers who attend other types of preschools. And these programs also build students’ confidence and strengthen students’ connections to their communities. As the report demonstrates, interest in this approach to education has been growing steadily over the past decade, and the pandemic could boost interest even further. Christy Merrick, director of the Natural Start Alliance, explains, “As health experts agree that virus transmission is less likely outdoors than indoors, and parents and education leaders are looking for creative solutions to safely return to school, interest in nature-based education could soar.”

Pointing to these and other benefits of outdoor learning, NAAEE recently released [guidance](#) describing how environmental education can help address some of the challenges of reopening schools during the pandemic. Schools are seeking creative solutions to increase distance between students while promoting healthy interaction between students and between students and teachers; solutions proposed by NAAEE include using the school grounds for outdoor classroom spaces, engaging community environmental and outdoor education programs as alternative resources for learning, and tapping into the expertise of environmental educators to support teaching and learning, particularly outdoors. Judy Braus, NAAEE’s executive director,

explains, “Environmental educators, including nature preschool educators, are experts in educating students outdoors safely, creatively, and effectively. They are an incredible resource in communities as we look for tools and strategies to safely reopen schools.”

As the education system in the United States grapples with how to balance children’s and teachers’ safety with the urgent need for children to return to school, outdoor education is gaining new attention. The *2020 Snapshot* demonstrates that this approach to education was increasingly popular before the pandemic and could be even more important moving forward. Nature preschools offer an opportunity to educate young children outside, with more distance and less stress—and with proven techniques that give our earliest learners a head start.

View the full *Nature-Based Preschools in the US: 2020 Snapshot* online:

<https://naturalstart.org/bright-ideas/nature-preschools-continue-impressive-growth-across-us>

###

About Natural Start Alliance

The Natural Start Alliance is a network of people and organizations that believe that all young children need frequent opportunities to experience, learn from, and care for nature and the environment through high-quality education. The Alliance, a project of the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE), serves as a backbone organization to focus and amplify the collective impact of nearly 1,000 schools and allied organizations that share this common vision. The Natural Start Alliance promotes early childhood environmental education through advocacy, research, professional training and resource development, leadership development, and convening the field every year with the [Nature-Based Early Learning Conference](#), set for July 29-31, 2020. For more information, visit naturalstart.org.

About NAAEE

For almost 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. NAAEE is the only national membership organization dedicated to strengthening EE and increasing the visibility and effectiveness of the field. With more than 20,000 members and supporters, including affiliations with 56 state and provincial EE organizations and members in more than 30 countries, NAAEE’s work aims to provide the field with professional development, access to learning networks and collaborative partnerships, tools and resources to promote effective practice, and leadership and capacity building. NAAEE is also involved in a number of field-building activities and signature programs, including the Natural Start Alliance to advance environmental education in early childhood and the Global Environmental Education Partnership—a global network dedicated to building capacity at the country level (see thegeep.org). For more information on NAAEE, visit <https://naaee.org>.