

Date of Hearing: April 8, 2026

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Darshana R. Patel, Chair

AB 2158 (Hoover) – As Introduced February 18, 2026

SUBJECT: Pupil instruction: outdoor learning

SUMMARY: Requires the state Superintendent of Public Instruction (SPI) to publish statewide guidance on outdoor learning. Requires the SPI, or a contracted nonprofit coordinator, to establish, manage, and evaluate the Statewide Outdoor Learning Pilot Program (Pilot Program). Specifically, **this bill**:

- 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) Finds and declares that outdoor learning improves student environmental literacy, overall academic achievement, student engagement, physical health, mental health, community connections, science, technology, engineering, and medicine (STEM) career preparation, climate resilience, and whole-child development.
- 3) States the intent of the Legislature is to extend environmental literacy by clarifying that outdoor learning is an effective instructional method and providing statewide guidance to improve student access.
- 4) Encourages local education agencies (LEAs) to integrate outdoor learning into standards-aligned instruction across subject areas. Authorizes an LEA to describe in its Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) how outdoor learning will be used to support students.
- 5) Requires the SPI, 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 arrange to develop and publish statewide guidance on outdoor learning. Requires the developed guidance to include:
 - 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;
- 6) Enables the SPI to provide professional learning resources to educators delivering outdoor learning aligned with the developed guidance, subject to an appropriation.

- 7) Establishes a three-year Statewide Outdoor Learning Pilot Program. Specifies the pilot shall consist of six pilot sites, each of which includes an LEA and community-based outdoor learning provider, and which are selected to represent diverse statewide locations, community types, grade spans, and program models. Specifies that the Pilot Program serve the following purposes:
 - a) Demonstrate the effectiveness of outdoor learning in improving student outcomes, including attendance, engagement, academic achievement, environmental literacy, and mental and physical health;
 - b) Build 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 communities historically underserved or disproportionately burdened by environmental harms.
- 8) Requires the SPI to select the pilot sites and a statewide evaluator to assess the impact of the Pilot Program, or site-specific evaluators if they adopt a common evaluation framework. Enables the SPI to post a summary of the Pilot Program to its website, including the Pilot Program's sites, design, outcomes, and potential improvements for future outdoor learning programs.
- 9) Requires the SPI 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 the California Department of Education (CDE) website.
- 10) Authorizes the SPI to contract with a nonprofit organization with demonstrated expertise in outdoor learning to serve as an intermediary grant coordinator. The intermediary grant coordinator may:
 - a) Develop grant award selection criteria, consult with the SPI on selecting grantees, provide technical assistance to grantees, and work with grantees in a community of practice;
 - b) Consult with the SPI to select the statewide evaluator or evaluators;
 - c) Develop the summary of the pilot program for the department website;
 - d) Facilitate program implementation, evaluation, communication, coordination, pilot site visits, and statewide learning community activities; and
 - e) Publish the final report

EXISTING LAW:

- 1) Directs the Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery (CalRecycle), the Secretary for Environmental Protection, the Natural Resources Agency, the CDE, and the State Board of Education (SBE) to develop environmental principles and concepts for elementary and secondary school pupils. (Public Resources Code (PRC) 71301)

- 2) Establishes the Instructional School Gardens Program, under the administration of CDE, for the promotion, creation, and support of instructional school gardens through the allocation of grants, and through technical assistance provided to LEAs. (Education Code (EC) 51796)
- 3) Authorizes the SPI to convene an interagency working group on instructional school gardens that may include, but not be limited to, representatives of CDE, the Department of Food and Agriculture, the State Department of Public Health, and the California Integrated Waste Management Board. The working group may advise the SPI on the following:
 - a. Effective and efficient means of encouraging LEAs to develop and maintain a quality instructional school garden program;
 - b. The availability of state and non-state resources and technical assistance to help LEAs in establishing and maintaining instructional school gardens; and
 - c. Public and private partnerships available to assist LEAs in using instructional school gardens to complement the academic program of participating schools. (EC 51796)
- 4) Authorizes school projects that support outdoor education on school grounds, including native gardens, orchards, vegetable gardens, outdoor classrooms, and other nature-based outdoor learning spaces, to not comply with accessible path of travel requirements if the cost of doing so would exceed 20% of the project's total construction costs. (EC 17672)
- 5) Allows new construction and modernization projects funded through the Public Education Facilities Modernization, Repair, and Safety Bond Act of 2024 to support outdoor learning. (EC 17072.35)
- 6) Directs the Department of Parks and Recreation to prioritize projects that accommodate outdoor learning opportunities for school students in the area when awarding grants pursuant to the Statewide Park Development and Community Revitalization Act of 2008. (Public Resource Code (PCR) 564)

FISCAL EFFECT: This bill has been keyed as a possible state-mandated local program by the Office of Legislative Counsel.

COMMENTS:

Need for the bill. 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.”

What is outdoor learning? Outdoor learning is a broad term that refers to educational activities that occur in or make use of outdoor settings. According to the CDE:

Outdoor learning environments provide flexible spaces for diverse learners, on or off campus, and are possible for all student populations in urban, suburban, and rural settings. While taking learning outside can be as simple as utilizing green spaces and school gardens,

local school communities often formally embed outdoor learning environments in their learning programs in a variety of ways.

On its website, the CDE offers the following examples of outdoor learning:

- Service-learning projects;
- School and community garden projects;
- Recycling Clubs;
- Schoolyard habitat restoration/creation;
- Interdisciplinary project-based learning;
- Campus and community improvements;
- Schoolyard tree planting projects;
- Local ecosystem support; and
- Field trips.

The broad definition of outdoor learning can create challenges when designing or evaluating programs. 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.

Given the broad definition of outdoor learning, *staff recommends the bill be amended to* incorporate additional elements found in outdoor learning, such as residential outdoor schools and physical education classes, and enable the CDE to flexibly provide funds to an LEA to address multiple forms of outdoor learning.

Given that the CDE already maintains resources devoted to outdoor learning, *staff recommends the bill be amended to* direct CDE to publish statewide guidance on outdoor learning on its existing webpage rather than separately distribute it.

Benefits of outdoor learning. On its website, the CDE has cited the following evidence-based benefits of outdoor learning:

- Outdoor learning offers opportunities for students to engage in physical activity and teambuilding. (Finn et al. 2018)
- Outdoor learning improves access to nature, which is beneficial to mental health, reduces stress, increases student engagement, and improves cognitive function. (Ming et al. 2018; Chawla 2015)
- A study of outdoor education programs showed improvements for at-risk youth in self-esteem, conflict resolution, relationships with peers, problem solving, motivation to learn, and behavior in class. (American Institutes for Research, 2005)
- Children who attended outdoor science school significantly raised their science scores by 27 percent, and the increase in science knowledge was maintained six to ten weeks after program participation. (American Institutes for Research, 2005)

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

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

One challenge in identifying the benefits of outdoor learning is that the term encompasses a wide variety of instructional interventions. 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 the following free resources:

- Green Schoolyards America: provides a start-up toolkit that includes an outdoor learning diagram template and an augmented reality visualizer for schools that assist with designing and budgeting outdoor learning environments to meet project goals.
- *Outdoors for All: Providing Equitable Access to Parks and Nature*: A California initiative that encourages coordination with school districts and regional governments to enhance green schoolyards and to fill park gaps outside of school hours. LEAs may consider entering into shared or joint-use agreements by opening access to green schoolyards to increase community access to outdoor spaces.
- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Schoolyard Habitat Guide: Offers a free guide for creating schoolyard habitats and outdoor classroom projects. The guide gives step-by-step details on forming a team, developing master plans, creating maintenance plans, and designing and installing projects to help transform school sites into spaces that encourage student inquiry, discovery, and environmental stewardship.
- Outdoor learning environments are supported by CDE programs, including the California Green Ribbon Schools Awards program, which honors schools who demonstrate excellence in resource efficiency, health and wellness, and environmental and sustainability education. Award winning schools also serve as models for green schoolyards, outdoor classrooms, and school gardening projects.

Instructional school gardens. The state has previously invested in school-based garden programs, which could support outdoor learning as defined in this bill.

According to the California School Garden Coalition, approximately 50% of California school districts show evidence of school gardens (see map). However, one-third of districts with school gardens do not appear to operate garden-based education programs. Across the state, the Coalition estimates only 34% of school districts maintain school garden-based education, and only 10% maintain a dedicated garden coordinator position. This suggests that additional funding is needed to fully utilize school gardens. The California School Garden Coalition is operated by the nonprofit Ten Strands, who are sponsoring this legislation.

The Legislature established the Instructional School Gardens Program in 1999 under the CDE and provided funding until 2002. The Legislature then created a competitive grant program and

appropriated \$200,000 in federal funding for the school gardens program. In 2006, legislation shifted administration of the program from CDE to the California Integrated Waste Management Board (now called CalRecycle), and established the Instructional School Garden Account in the State Treasury. The 2006 Budget Act appropriated \$15 million from the Proposition 98 Reversion Account for school garden equipment and supplies. No state funding remains for the program.

While the Instructional School Gardens Program technically still exists, the state does not fund or specifically support this program. SB 341 (Perez) of the 2025 Session would have re-established the Instructional School Gardens Program as a competitive grant program. The proposed grant was similar to the one described in this bill, in that it would have enabled LEAs to collaborate with community-based partners to develop school-based gardens and related educational programs. SB 341 was held in the Senate Appropriations.

State commitments to environmental literacy. SB 720 (Allen), Chapter 374 of the 2018 Session, declared environmental literacy an important element of elementary and secondary education, and encouraged LEAs to incorporate environmental literacy into their LCAP; provide professional development related to environmental literacy to educators; build partnerships with community-based environmental organizations; and ensure that environmental literacy is equitably available to all students. They further specified that environmental literacy principles and concepts, first developed in 2008, be incorporated wherever possible into instructional frameworks.

In 2014, SPI Torlakson assembled the California Environmental Literacy Task Force (ELTF) to create a blueprint for achieving environmental literacy for all California students. The Blueprint, entitled *A Blueprint for Environmental Literacy: Educating Every Student In, About, and For the Environment*, was published in 2015. The Blueprint highlights the need for expanded environmental literacy education by referencing a recent survey of 520 California school principals. This survey showed that 13% of schools have integrated environmental education into their curricula, and 77% spend less than \$5,000 on field trips, professional development, and curricular materials for environmental education.

In 2003, the Legislature required the Secretary for the California Environmental Protection Agency to develop environmental principles and concepts for elementary and secondary school students, and use those principles and concepts to develop model environmental curricula. The result is the Education and the Environment Initiative (EEI), which is designed to increase environmental literacy, now housed within CalRecycle. The EEI Curriculum is available to educators in print and online at no cost.

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.

Research indicates that while outdoor learning benefits all students, it benefits girls more than boys and students of color more than white students, making it a powerful resource for closing opportunity and achievement gaps. By strengthening guidance and building statewide capacity,

AB 2158 will help ensure that all California students, regardless of zip code, have access to learning experiences that support academic success, reduce stress, and encourage healthy engagement beyond screens.

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, including science, history-social science, English language arts, mathematics, and the arts.”

Related legislation. SB 341 (Perez) of the 2025-26 Session would have re-established the Instructional School Gardens Program as a competitive grant program, and shifts its administration from the CDE to the California Department of Food and Agriculture. This bill was held in Senate Appropriations Committee.

SB 1091 (Menjivar), Chapter 1014 of the 2023-24 Session, allows, for school construction projects approved by the Division of the State Architect (DSA) on or before December 31, 2030, certain school ground construction projects to not comply with accessible path of travel requirements if the cost of doing so would exceed 20% of the project's total construction costs.

AB 247 (Muratsuchi), Chapter 81 of the 2023-24 Session, allows new construction and modernization projects funded through the Public Education Facilities Modernization, Repair, and Safety Bond Act of 2024 to support outdoor learning.

SB 720 (Allen), Chapter 374 of the 2017-18 Session, revises provisions relating to environmental education principles by, among other things, (1) renaming them the environmental principles and concepts; (2) revising the process for, and entities involved in, updating the environmental principles and concepts; and (3) requiring the Instructional Quality Commission to ensure that the environmental principles and concepts are integrated into content standards and curriculum frameworks whenever those standards and frameworks are revised.

Recommended Committee Amendments. Staff recommends that the bill be amended as follows:

- 1) Include “residential outdoor school” in the definition of outdoor learning.
- 2) Include physical education in the list of subjects in which LEAs are encouraged to incorporate outdoor learning.
- 3) Remove the suggestion that LEAs include descriptions of outdoor learning in their LCAP or other relevant planning document.
- 4) Enable the CDE to flexibly provide resources to address the outdoor learning needs of each LEA.
- 5) Correctly reference the definition of unduplicated youth and the CDE.
- 6) Emphasize the pilot will investigate, rather than confirm, the benefits of outdoor learning for California students.
- 7) Remove the intermediary grants coordinator position.

- 8) Include preparation for STEM-based careers and recommendations for statewide implementation in the evaluation of the Pilot Program.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

7th Generation Advisors
 Active San Gabriel Valley
 Adolfo Camarillo High School
 Alameda County Office of Education
 American River Natural History Association DbA Effie Yeaw Nature Center
 Arc
 Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education
 Association of Nature Center Administrators
 Bay Area Wilderness Training
 Bay Tree Design
 Black in Marine Science
 Black Thumb Farm
 Bluesky Consulting
 Burbank Eco Council
 Cadman Cooking and Garden Education Program
 California Academy of Sciences
 California Association of Science Educators
 California Catholic Conference
 California Charter Schools Association
 California Environmental Education Foundation
 California Outdoor Recreation Partnership
 California Outdoor Schools Association
 California State Parks Foundation
 California State Parent Teacher Association
 Camp Chrysalis
 Camp Ocean Pines, INC
 Center for Ecoliteracy
 Center for Land-based Learning
 California Federation of Teachers
 Children & Nature Network
 Children and Screens: Institute of Digital Media and Child Development
 Climate Action Pathways for Schools
 Community Nature Connection
 Community Resources for Science
 Craig Strang Consulting
 Crystal Cove Conservancy
 Dfusion INC
 Edventure More (EDMO)
 Ege Foundation (eternal Generations Emerging)
 Elders Climate Action (ECA) Northern CA Chapter
 Elders Climate Action (ECA) Southern CA Chapter
 Environmental Action Committee of West Marin

Environmental Charter Schools
Exploring New Horizons Outdoor Schools
Foodwise
Friends of the Los Angeles River
Friends of the Lost Coast
Green Schoolyards America
Groundwork San Diego Chollas Creek
Icrest Education Foundation
In Good Company
Inside the Outdoors Foundation
Inverness Associates
Justice Outside
Life Lab
Living Classroom
Luberski, INC. Dba Hidden Villa Ranch
Marine Science Institute
National Marine Educators Association (NMEA)
North American Association for Environmental Education
Nurture Nature
O'Neill Sea Odyssey
Oakland Goes Outdoors
Orange County Department of Education
Outdoor Afro
Outdoor Outreach
Outdoorism Collective
Outward Bound Adventures
Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History
People, Food and Land Foundation
Project Green
Rialto Unified School District
Richmond Outdoors Coalition
Roots to Branches Education
Sacramento Chinese Community Service Center
Sacramento Splash
Salted Roots
Samuel Lawrence Foundation
San Diego Children and Nature
San Diego County Outdoor Education Foundation
San Diego Natural History Museum
San Diego Pediatricians for Clean Air
San Joaquin County Office of Education
Save Our Shores
Scaling Student Success
Shady Creek Outdoor School
Silicon Valley Youth Climate Action
Stanislaus County Office of Education
Stanislaus County Office of Education, Foothill Horizons Outdoor School
Steam Learning Institute
Strategic Energy Innovations

Sustainable Mill Valley
Sustainconsulting, LLC
Ten Strands
The Escondido Creek Conservancy
The Friends of Daley Ranch
The Nueva School
Together in Nature Consulting, Plc
Trust for Public Land; the
UC Davis Center for Community and Citizen Science
UC Davis Center for Occupational and Environmental Health
Undauntedk12
World Ocean Observatory
Yes Nature to Neighborhoods

Opposition

None on file.

Analysis Prepared by: Sarah Cate Hawthorne / ED. / (916) 319-2087