

A History of Forest Schools

Diana Brennan
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For most of the history of humanity, outdoor learning was the norm, as children learned from adults in their groups how to survive and thrive in the world. We evolved as outdoor learners and as part of the natural world.

Inspired by the open-air classrooms of Europe, and battling a tuberculosis epidemic, the USA established its first open air school right here in Providence, Rhode Island in 1908.

Education opportunities, including outdoor education, which focused on more active, community based education were woven into the progressive education movement, which was incorporated into some American schools in the early 20th century. John Dewey's Laboratory School in Chicago was a prime example of this approach.

The progressive approach in public schools fell out of favor in the 1940s and 1950s, and outdoor educational opportunities separate from public school rose in importance, including organized camping and outdoor teacher training. In the 1960s, environmental education, which often occurred outdoors, became popular.

For the past several decades, outdoor learning has mainly been an extra-curricular activity. Summer camps, enrichment programs, and clubs offer opportunities for learner-led education outdoors. However, forest schools as a primary learning environment have been gaining in popularity.

The Laona School Forest in Wisconsin, purchased in 1927, was the first purpose-built forest classroom in the United States. The first known modern forest school in the United States did not arrive until 1996, when Tender Tracks in Fairfax, California was founded.

Forest and nature classrooms in the United States are most commonly available for preschool age learners. While not truly forest school, programs like Tinkergarten, which was founded in 2010, provide opportunities for parents to bring their young children to a forest classroom for communal learning. The Free Forest School program brings together learners of all ages, often homeschoolers, to explore and join in free play in the woods. This program focuses on caring adults introducing children to nature, but involves very minimal training and expertise, and is not a true forest school as defined by UK standards.

The forest school concept has been gaining popularity in the USA in recent years, particularly in the wake of the COVID pandemic. Most of these schools are unlicensed and unregulated, and there is significant variability in the delivery of programs. In recent years this has started to change. In 2016, the Forest School Training Institute (FSTI) began offering certification courses. In 2019, Washington became the first state to license outdoor preschools. In 2022, The Eastern Region Association of Forest and Nature Schools (ERAFANS) began to offer teacher training for early childhood (preschool) educators. While the United States still has a long way to go in implementing consistent requirements and standards for forest school programs, particularly those for older learners, it is encouraging to see interest building and training programs being offered in the USA.

In Rhode Island, the closest thing we have to true forest school is EnrichRI's Wildschool, which incorporates many Forest School elements such as learner-led exploration, risky play, and use of fire and tools. It is exclusively a homeschool program. Some private schools offer outdoor, nature-based education opportunities

as well. Nature preschools are available in southern Rhode Island and in nearby Massachusetts, either through private schools or MassAudubon. All of these programs are paid for by the participating families.

Northern Rhode Island Forest School is the first of its kind in our state. We will provide enrichment opportunities for homeschool and public school children, which will be paid for by participating families. One of our main goals is to bring this type of learning to the children who most need it, and whose families may not be able to afford additional expenses or time commitments. We are actively working with the local public schools to explore opportunities to bring Forest School programs to the school campuses once we have a certified Level 3 Forest School Leader. If we are successful, it will be the first program we know of that brings Forest School programming into mainstream public schools, providing opportunities to children of all incomes and backgrounds. Public school students in the USA are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress and anxiety, particularly in the wake of COVID and school shootings, and both teachers and students are put under enormous pressure to perform to standards and test well. We are working to ensure that the next chapter of the history of forest schools in America includes their introduction into mainstream public schools and the spread of this approach nation-wide.

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