

BOSTON SCHOOLYARD FUNDERS COLLABORATIVE 2007-2008 EVALUATION REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Prepared by Rachel Becker-Klein, and PEER Associates, Inc.
August, 2008*

The primary finding from this evaluation was that outdoor classrooms (OCs) were valued by school communities, and that in order for schools to take full advantage of the opportunities provided by the OC, they required additional support, such as professional development (PD) workshops, mentoring, and networking. Additional findings included:



- All interviewees recognized the value of the OC to students;
- OC design was essential to its functionality;
- Schools demonstrated the potential to increase OC use, if challenges could be overcome;
- Educators reported benefits to themselves and their students as a result of the workshops; and
- Interviewees were interested in finding more ways that the OC could support class curricula.

Over the course of the 2007-2008 evaluation, Boston Schoolyard Funders Collaborative (BSFC) staff made some programming changes in response to requests from schools for increased support in using the OC. BSFC staff recognized that educators required additional support in order to use the OCs more effectively, and shifted the focus of their programming to emphasize the professional development workshops they offer through BPS.

The evaluation included data from the following sources:

- 40 interviews with educators and administrators at three BPS sites (Gardner Elementary, Harvard-Kent Elementary, and Trotter Elementary);
- 10 interviews with educators who participated in the Outdoor Writers Workshop (OWW) and/or Science in the Schoolyard (SSY) Workshop.

*"Teachers spend weeks teaching soil. I took [the students out to the OC] and tied in weathering, erosion, and soil and I feel like they wouldn't have mastered it anymore if I'd spent three days on it than this forty-five minute walk because everything was tied together."
- BPS Educator*

A more detailed discussion of this evaluation's findings is presented below.

Findings and Discussion

All interviewees recognized the value of the OC to students

"There is a difference in how students use descriptive language, how they write, and what they notice when they are outside, because they're really using their senses. You can see a difference, because they can really describe, and they know how to observe."
- BPS Educator

Most educators, even those who did not make use of the OC, believed that engaging in hands-on learning and spending time outdoors had academic value for students. Educators who used the OC asserted that the outdoor space provided a rare opportunity for their students to be outside, allowing for students to be more engaged in learning, and more observant of their surroundings. Some educators reported that teaching content in the OC helped students understand, remember, and integrate the material in a way that was more real and more lasting than teaching and learning from a book.

OC design was essential to its functionality

Educators reported that some elements of the OC promoted higher use, primarily by making the OC more accessible and easier to use, and by increasing educator ownership of the OC. The following specific layout and design considerations emerged as most important: smaller and more centralized OC areas; educator freedom in planting; fencing; a central location to keep materials; and circular seating areas. If implemented successfully, such design elements could serve to alleviate some behavior management concerns expressed by educators. Moreover, educator input into the design of the site was one of the keys to their regular use of the OC.



Schools demonstrated the potential to increase OC use, if challenges could be overcome

"I think some [teachers] are just nervous because [the OC is] a different kind of place. A lot of people feel that they don't have the time - they're overwhelmed, and they feel that they have to cover the curriculum."
- BPS Educator

Each of the schools included in this evaluation had at least some educators who regularly used the OC. However, many school staff also reported that there was room for more frequent use of the OC, provided that some challenges were addressed. Common challenges to more frequent OC use included: time constraints; an administrative focus on MCAS; behavior management concerns; a lack of concrete plans for using the OC; and a lack of understanding about how to mesh use of the OC with their existing curricula/standards. It was also important to have a strong champion of the OC at the school. School champions served to remind others that the OC was available for teaching, to inspire other teachers, and to increase educators' understanding and knowledge of how to use the OC. In addition, school-wide professional development on use of the OC was valuable to educators (who viewed the PD as increasing their comfort teaching outdoors), and requested by educators who did not have this at their school. Finally, the school with the highest OC use had consistent and ongoing communication with BSFC.

Educators reported benefits to themselves and their students as a result of the workshops

"As a teacher I have changed how I approach teaching. The OWW was like a brand new beginning for me, I now have so much enthusiasm. I love this. Everyone needs to take this class." - BPS Educator

All educators, regardless of the extent of their previous experience using the outdoors, claimed that the workshops increased and enhanced their use of nature, and provided useful suggestions on integrating the outdoors into their curricula more regularly. Moreover, all interviewees noted several ways that their increased use of the outdoors had positively impacted their students, including: enhanced student engagement in learning; increased appreciation of nature; improved writing skills; increased vocabulary; helped struggling learners; and enhanced detailed observations.

Interviewees were interested in finding more ways that the OC could support class curricula

"[Teachers] have been using [the OC] for science, or sometimes they go out there just to do reading. But it can't be just going out there and sitting in it. It has to be tied to the curriculum, and to school requirements." - BPS Administrator

Many classroom educators understood how the OC was connected to science or writing, but had less of an understanding of how they could incorporate the outdoors into their classroom curricula. Yet, most educators also expressed interest in the idea of increasingly integrating the OC into their classroom. Administrators were also concerned with making explicit links between use of the OC and curricular components and/or standards.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, most educators agreed that the OC provided a safe, positive, and meaningful outdoor learning opportunity for students, and many educators reported using the OC in a variety of ways. BSFC staff recognized room for improvement in OC use at the schools, and offered professional development workshops to provide educators with the ideas and tools necessary to increase their use. Educators who took the workshops reported that they did increase the extent to which they incorporated the OC into their teaching practice.

Recommendations for BSFC include:

- ✓ Increase and improve ongoing, long-term communication between BSFC and school staff, with a focus on engaging school administration and staff.
- ✓ Help schools to promote regular use of the OC within each school (e.g. sponsor a champion of the OC from within the school).
- ✓ Provide additional, ongoing networking opportunities for educators.



"For me, learning is not something that is done in a confined area through books; it's something that should be real and authentic, and that's another big benefit of the OC - it gives the kids an experience. They find something tangible outside and it acts as a springboard, and you can do so much with that."

- BPS Educator