

Seasons of Play: The First Year in Our Outdoor Classroom

Abington Friends School, Jenkintown PA

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AFS Outside

AFS Outside is a school wide outdoor learning program designed to connect children in sustained and meaningful ways with the living world while fully realizing the enormous potential of our beautiful campus.

Phase 1 - Early Childhood

The completed Early Childhood nature playground transformed a traditional playground into an inviting outdoor space that encourages learning, discovery and play in a natural setting. It is the first nature playground in a school in Pennsylvania to be accredited by the National Arbor Day Foundation.

The collaborative planning process for the space included our faculty and staff, our students, our families and our administration, along with the Arbor Day Foundation, community organizations and our team of architects. Our Lower School students also participated by contributing their ideas and engaging in lively discussion as the project unfolded.

The nature playground opened to our youngest students at the beginning of the 2012 school year. Our new site serves as both playground and classroom, creating a vital space for outdoor activities in all weather and offering the varied experiences of exploration and imaginative play that are such critical development experiences for young children.

Strategic Vision

The strategic vision for Abington Friends School, *Leading By Design: Education for a Changing World*, is driven by a comprehensive vision of contemporary education, one that is designed for the dynamic world of change into which our children are growing.

Our research and reflection about the lives of children today also leads us to lift up the indispensable value of experience of the natural world for children's intellectual, social, spiritual and physical development.

Once a given in earlier generations, varied time in the outdoors for play, exploration, observation and overall aesthetic and sensory experience is seriously underrepresented in the overly mediated lives of children today. The natural world provides a rich context for imagination, a different sense of time tied to natural cycles, and an indelible range of patterns to which we are cognitively wired to respond. And the physicality of being outdoors provides the basis for intuition in math, the sciences, the arts and movement that is indispensable for a lifetime of intellectual development.

We believe that the AFS campus, long a rich source of inspiration for our curriculum and many long standing traditions, provides an outstanding resource to be more fully developed as a place for learning and play in the lives of our students. Emerging ideas about designing outdoor spaces for children have captured the imagination of our students and faculty alike and we excited to share the first phase of projects for an all-school program we are calling AFS Outside.

Outdoor Experiences

AFS Outside expands upon our already strong history of an outdoor learning and environmental education curriculum. Our outdoor spaces provide magnificent resources for exploration and serious study for our students at all ages and stages of development.

Our children are introduced to environmental education through unstructured and structured time outdoors spent exploring and making discoveries about the natural world. Our outdoor education programs include creek walks, stream water quality studies, tree and animal track identification, bird adaptations, wildlife habitat gardening and environmental art projects.

Our vision for AFS Outside aligns beautifully with our core Quaker values. Through this outdoor learning program we can deepen our commitment as a school to stewardship, simplicity and community, three important tenets of Quakerism. We envision outdoor Meetings for Worship as well as numerous community building and service learning opportunities. We also foresee AFS Outside as a wonderful resource for collaboration with community partners including the Briar Bush Nature Center and the Abington Art Center.

Curricular Connections

Our faculty team continues to develop new ways to incorporate the outdoors into the curriculum. They include:

<p>Math Connections Graphing heights of plants Sorting types of seeds Calculating biodiversity in a transect Exploring patterns in nature Calculating the height of trees Weighing biomass</p> <p>Art and Nature Sketching Sculpting Environmental art Natural dyes Natural Clay Observational drawing Watercolor</p> <p>Health and Wellness Organic gardening Outdoor cooperative games Strength building Balance and agility Gross and fine motor movement Social emotional well being Strengthening mental and visual acuity</p> <p>Sustainability and Environmental Studies Wildlife habitat creation Stream restoration Sustainable gardening Campus beautification and cleanup</p>	<p>Science Stream testing Wildlife observation Plant Identification/Dichotomous keys Transect studies/mapping Life cycles Geology and earth science Outdoor Physics</p> <p>Language Arts Journaling/Poetry Outdoor read-aloud Letter exploration Descriptive writing Creating campus signage Vocabulary development</p> <p>Music and movement Loco-motor activities Interpreting patterns in nature Outdoor concerts Natural instruments Interpretive dances Developing listening skills Sound mapping</p>
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Community Partnerships

AFS has a history of partnering with environmental/community organizations to provide a variety of outdoor/environmental activities. As our planning for AFS Outside has developed, we have begun some exciting partnerships with area organizations.

Briar Bush Nature Center: Early in our planning process, our entire Lower School faculty spent a day at Briar Bush Nature Center learning about engaging students in the outdoors. Much of what we have been discovering about outdoor learning has been put into practice at Briar Bush with “outdoor classrooms.” We hosted a Nature Playdate in conjunction with Briar Bush last spring that was attended by over 150 community members.

Primex: We have developed a rewarding partnership with Primex, the garden center in nearby Glenside. Primex has donated hundreds of seed packets, as well as a composter to the School and will be hosting a free seed germination workshop with our faculty in the new year.

Metcalf Architecture and Design: We worked with Alan Metcalfe and his design team to realize the magnificent play structure that anchors Phase 1 of AFS Outside. The design process was highly collaborative, with Alan visiting the School on several occasions to discuss the structure with both faculty and students.

Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources: The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources awarded the School a grant in support of AFS Outside.

Tookany-Tacony Franford Watershed Partnership: We are working with this watershed group to establish a riparian buffer at our stream and daylight a section of the headwaters of the stream.

Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and Meadowbrook Farm: We are working with PHS to establish a tree-tagging program at our 300+ year old campus with many magnificent trees. We’re also doing a joint bulb-forcing project with them culminating in a display at the Philadelphia Flower Show.

Philadelphia Bee Company: We work with this company every year to educate our students about the importance of bees.

Other groups include: **The Delaware Valley Green Building Council, The Philadelphia Water Company, The Academy of Natural Sciences, Sustainable Solutions, Inc.**