

QUALIFICATIONS: OUTDOOR CLASSROOM PROJECT DEMONSTRATION SITE

Qualifications and criteria for becoming an
Outdoor Classroom Project Demonstration Site.



Qualifications and Criteria to Become an Outdoor Classroom Project® Demonstration or Recognized Site

Participation

Participation as an Outdoor Classroom Project Demonstration or Recognized Site is first and lastly determined by *“the ongoing implementation of a commitment to continuous improvement in a program’s outdoor environment, philosophy, and practices.”* A program that is an active Demonstration or Recognized Site and a member of the Demonstration Site Network has its’ director sign a document, memorializing this commitment, follows through with that commitment, and maintains documentation of it. This membership is renewed every two years after the first year of certification and is supported and validated through peer group review. The applying program determines whether it is selecting to be a “demonstration” or “recognized” site (described on the Application & Commitment Statement). Participation confers membership in the Outdoor Classroom Project Demonstration Site Network. Both Demonstration and Recognized centers are included in the Network.

Demonstration Site Network Description

The Outdoor Classroom Project® Demonstration Site Network is a group of early care and education programs that voluntarily maintain a mutually agreed-upon set of standards developed by the Outdoor Classroom Project for the purpose of promoting and supporting the Outdoor Classroom philosophy and practices. By participating, they agree to receive visitors to their programs to observe their unique implementation of the Outdoor Classroom in action. (Recognized centers do not agree to visitation, however.)

Benefits

The objective of the Demonstration Site Network is to improve the well-being of children through improving the well-being of the programs of early care and education that serve them. The Demonstration Site Network is designed to first support the centers in the Network. It does this by establishing and supporting a philosophy, a set of practices, and type of outdoor environment. Participation in the Network helps you establish your program at a specific level of quality. It connects you to other centers with a similar commitment. Centers in the Network are able to draw on one another and on the Outdoor Classroom Project for support, so that enhancing quality is continually supported. Support also occurs through training that is made available for Network centers, as well as through meetings with each other. In this way, Network members are able to support each other. Participating Demonstration and Recognized centers also benefit by becoming more attractive to parents and strengthening enrollment. Not infrequently, involved centers become “the place to enroll your child” after they have been involved with the Outdoor Classroom Project for a relatively brief period of time and develop an extensive waiting list. Participating centers will both receive recognition in the form of a framed certificate and be featured on the Outdoor Classroom Project website. When applicable, the Demonstration Site Network is promoted at CAEYC, NAYEC and other ECE Conferences

nationwide. Centers may also receive promotional materials as part of being in the Network and receive a 10% discount for their staff to attend all OCP events, conferences, and trainings. The Network and its centers are also a focus of fund development efforts to support the Network and its centers.

Criteria to Become an Outdoor Classroom Project Demonstration or Recognized Site

Outdoor Classroom Specialist. Each Demonstration and Recognized Site must have a minimum of one staff member who is an Outdoor Classroom Specialist (completion of the Outdoor Classroom Project Specialist Level I Training Series). It is recommended that centers have multiple staff who are Outdoor Classroom Specialists. Additionally it is recommended that a minimum of one staff member has also completed the Outdoor Classroom Specialist Level II and Level III Training Series.

A center needs to meet these five criteria at the “Adequately Met” level in order to qualify as a recognized site. An Outdoor Classroom Demonstration Site must meet at least three at the “Exemplary Level. The levels are: Not Observed, Partially Met, Adequately Met, and Exemplary (NO, PM, AM, E).

Time - Children spend substantial periods of time outside, and it is easy and safe for them to get there; they are free to move easily between the indoors and outdoors. “Substantial” means 30 - 50% of the time or more. Centers that do not have adjacent playgrounds couldn’t score an Exemplary because they don’t have indoor / outdoor flow. Time is also about the length of time they are outside. A minimum of a 45 minute stretch would be the “AM” level.

Space - There is enough room for all activities and enough room for children to run. The yard needs to be big enough for children to be physically active. There should be room for most of the range of activities listed in # 3 below and found in the list following. If a yard lacks space for swings it generally would not be given an “E”.

Activities - There is a full range of activities for children to participate in, including many activities that are traditionally thought of as “indoor activities”. Activities are planned with consideration for children’s emerging and ongoing interests and challenges for a wide range of skill development are present.

Child Engagement and Initiation– While outside, children are fully engaged in learning that they have initiated. As one looks at the yard, they should see groups of children playing at different activities. It should be obvious that the children are connected to the activities with which they are engaged. Children should be rushing to find materials to work with, talking excitedly and asking for teacher support. You should not see any significant number of children wandering aimlessly around. The predominate “feel” should be one of child initiation. There may be a teacher-led activity here or there, but groups of children should be scattered around.

Engaged Teachers - When the children are outside, the teachers are engaged with them and their activities. They are physically close and move with the children when the children move.

Steps to Become an Outdoor Classroom Project Demonstration or Recognized Site

Step One - Obtain Enthusiastic Organization Consensus

Staff commitment, supported by center governance / ownership and parents, is the core element of being an Outdoor Classroom Project Demonstration / Recognized Site. In the context of participating as one of these sites, the term “consensus” means that everyone in the center agrees to support such participation to the best of their ability. That support will always be variable, depending on the individual, but at minimum, every member of the organization agrees not to obstruct or undermine the efforts of the others who want to participate.

Step Two - Perform Self Evaluation / Stage Placement

Utilizing the Outdoor Classroom Project Description of Stages, staff of an ECE program must identify the center’s stage of development.

If the program does not meet Stage 5 requirements, they implement a written plan for meeting those requirements. They can either submit that plan concurrently with making a formal application for Network membership, or complete the plan tasks and then submit their application at the higher level.

Step Three - Perform Self Evaluation / Perception Survey

All staff complete the Outdoor Classroom Staff Perception Survey. (For some staff this may be the second time if they performed it under Step One and much time has passed since taking that step, for others the first.)

Step Four - Complete Application and Statement of Commitment

Staff complete an “Application and Commitment Statement”. The Application addresses two questions.

- 1) *What makes your program especially suited to be a member of the Outdoor Classroom Project Demonstration Site Network beyond fulfillment of the basic requirements?*
- 2) *How will you ensure that you remain a vibrant and vital participant in the Network over the coming year?*

Step Five - Submit Application Materials

When the program has completed steps one through four, it submits its materials to the Outdoor Classroom Project for review and requests a Peer Review Committee site visit.

Ongoing Participation Requirements

The ongoing participation requirements of a member of the Demonstration Site Network are as follows:

- 1) Maintain the philosophy, practices and environment established at the time of its validation.
- 2) Fulfill the criteria required for its status as a Demonstration or a Recognized site.

- 3) Make measurable improvement in practices and environment over the course of the year and provide documentation annually.
- 4) Have a minimum of one staff person attend at least one network organization meeting each quarter or less frequently if so structured.
- 5) Have a minimum of four staff attend at least two training events annually, when events are available in your region. (This can be fulfilled by two staff attending one event and two different staff attending a second event or any combination of attendance at events beyond that.)
- 6) Reapply for membership and be re-confirmed as provided in the re-confirmation guidelines and application. (Centers that are reconfirmed may be reconfirmed for more than one year.)
- 7) Provide at least one staff person to the Network Peer Review Team to be available for validation visits over the course of a year not to exceed three visits per year.