Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Minority Leader Schumer & Madame Speaker Pelosi and Leader McCarthy:

As you evaluate funding for the resources our nation’s schools will need to reopen in person this Fall and next year, the undersigned organizations urge you to give special consideration to the role outdoor spaces can play in enhancing the safety, well-being, and academic success of students and teachers. Supporting school ground improvements and programs for effective outdoor classrooms, safe play, and project-based learning could make a significant difference in the back-to-school efforts of public K-12 school districts nationwide. We urge you to consider school ground improvements in any shorter term funding for schools and in funding support for longer term renovations and new school construction.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) guidelines for reopening schools during the pandemic emphasize the importance of getting children of all ages back to school for a range of reasons, including support for sustained academic achievement, stress reduction, food security, and more. Among the recommendations provided by the AAP for every age group—use outdoor spaces as much as possible.

The average primary school sits on five or more acres, while the average secondary school occupies 15 to 20 acres. And yet very few of the 100,000 public K-12 school in the U.S. fully utilize outdoor space for learning. Effective use of outdoor spaces may ultimately permit more students to attend school more days per week. Moreover, research increasingly shows significant benefits of outdoor learning on mental and physical health, stress reduction, student engagement and academic success.

The North American Association for Environmental Education recently developed guidance to help schools think about creative and more nature-based use of schoolyards and outdoor spaces as they plan for safe reopening during the coming school year. Opportunities to use outdoor spaces will vary in different parts of the country, for different age groups, and during different parts of the year. Green Schoolyards America has outlined several site planning considerations and scenarios. With proper resources, some of the steps that schools can take include:

- Taking a full inventory of outdoor locations where chairs, tables, benches etc. can be assembled in coherent learning spaces.
- Using vegetated areas, such as under trees, next to gardens and clustered landscaping to create reduced-stress environments, shade and modest screening and separation between classes.
- Erecting low cost open-sided tents to create additional weather appropriate classroom spaces in schoolyards.
- Providing outdoor opportunities for hands-on natural science investigations, community service projects, and authentic project-based STEM education.
Partnering with community-based environmental education and other nonformal program providers who can increase a school’s capacity to engage students in outdoor learning and serve as advisors for effective use of the schoolgrounds for learning.

Funding that supports the well-planned and effective use of outdoor school spaces for learning and disease prevention and management would provide major assistance to parents and educators as they rise to meet the many challenges presented by the pandemic. This will be particularly important, in the shorter run, for addressing inequities in lower income schools where cramped indoor conditions are often not very good for appropriate social distancing and could bring disproportionate harm to families and communities those schools serve.

We recognize that state and local education agencies face enormous challenges and differing timelines, based on available public health data and local guidelines, as they plan for the 2020-2021 school year and beyond. Investments in creative approaches to using the outdoors can help to address some of those challenges and potentially pave the way for an eventual return to school that is not only safer, but contributes to a vastly more healthy and meaningful education.

Sincerely,

National Organizations

America Walks
American Camp Association
American Public Gardens Association
Association for Experiential Education
Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education
Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies - Project WILD
Association of Nature Center Administrators
Association of Science and Technology Centers
Association of Zoos and Aquariums
Blue Sky Funders Forum
Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood
Campaign for Environmental Literacy
Children & Nature Network
Climate Generation: A Will Steger Legacy
Earth Day Network
Earth Force
EcoRise
FoodCorps
George B. Storer Foundation
Green Schools Alliance
Green Schools National Network, Inc.
Green Schoolyards America
Institute for Learning Innovation
Life Lab
National Project for Excellence in Environmental Education
National Association for Interpretation
National Science Teaching Association
National Wildlife Federation
State and Regional Organizations

A Child's Inspiration: Wildlife Discovery Garden
Agape Center for Environmental Education
Aldo Leopold Nature Center
Alicecostello.com
Alliance for New Jersey Environmental Education
Alpine Ranch Creative Health and Ecological Solutions
American YouthWorks
Annabel C. Perry PreK-8
Antioch University
Appomattox 4-H
ARCHES
Arizona Association for Environmental Education
Arizona Center for Nature Conservation/Phoenix Zoo
Arkansas Environmental Education Association
Arkansas Forestry Association Education Foundation
Audubon at Riverlands
Austin Chapter Texas Association for the Education of Young Children
Austin Parks Foundation
Avid4 Adventure
Belchertown School Garden
Bennu LLC
Big Island Invasive Species Committee
Blandford Nature Center
Blooming Grove Montessori
Blue Sky Fund
Bluff Lake Nature Center
Botanical Research Institute of Texas (BRIT)
Broward County Public Schools
Brown Family Environmental Center at Kenyon College
California Association for Environmental and Outdoor Education
California Outdoor Engagement Coalition
Camp Chrysalis
Camp Fire
Camp Fire Central Puget Sound
Camp Fire Central Texas
Camp Ocean Pines
Camp Oty'Okwa/Big Brothers Big Sisters of Central Ohio
Camp Sealth
Canyonlands Field Institute
Carpenter St Croix Valley Nature Center
Carthage R9 School District
Cassel Landscape Architects
Catamount Institute
Cave of the Mounds National Natural Landmark
Center for Getting Things Started
Central Park School for Children
Chaparral Elementary School
Chaparral Hawks Health Garden
Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools
Chicopee Public Schools
Chihuahuan Desert Nature Center & Botanical Gardens
Christ the King School
Christoffel Conservation
Cincinnati Nature Center
Circulate San Diego
Citizens' Environmental Coalition
City Growers
City of Austin - Parks & Recreation Department
City of Raleigh Parks
City of Watsonville Public Works Conservation Academy
Clay County Soil & Water Conservation District
Clemson Extension School & Community Gardening
Colorado Alliance for Environmental Education
Colorado Mountain Club
Colorado Springs Utilities
Columbia MO Outdoor Classroom
Columbia Public Schools
Conrad Weiser Middle School
Conservancy for Cuyahoga Valley National Park
Cope Environmental Center
Cornell Lab of Ornithology
County of San Diego Master Gardeners, School Garden Committee
Covenant Harbor Bible Camp
Cultivating Community
Curry Watersheds Partnership
D3 Green Schools Group
Daggett Montessori
DC Environmental Education Consortium (DCEEC)
Deerfield Beach High School
Denali Education Center
Dickerson Park Zoo
Dillard High
Discovery Woods School
District 14 Green Alliance, Brooklyn, NY
Dodge Nature Center and Preschool
Donald Danforth Plant Science Center
Douglas-Hart Nature Center
DPS Hub Farm
Driftwood Elementary School
Duke University, Nicholas School of the Environment
Duluth Forest Kinderhaus
Dunes Learning Center
Durham Public Schools
Durham Public Schools Hub Farm
Dutch Fork Elementary Academy of Environmental Sciences
E3 Washington
Eagle Point Elementary School
Ealy Elementary - Whitehall District Schools
EarlySpace, LLC
East Central ISD
Eastern Kentucky University
Eco Expressions
Edible Schoolyard NYC
Edwardsville CUSD7
Ehrhardt Elementary
El Paso County Community Services
Emory Climate Collaborative
Environmental Education Association of Illinois
Environmental Education Association of Indiana
Environmental Education Council of Ohio
Environmental Education of New Mexico
Environmental Educators of North Carolina
Environmental Learning Center
Environmental Policy Innovation Center
Everest Point Homeschool Academy
Everglades High School
Exploring New Horizons Outdoor Schools
Fairfax County Public Schools
Fall in the Field
Fallen Timbers Environmental Center
Falls of the Ohio Foundation
Farm Discovery at Live Earth
Ferguson-Florissant School District
Firelands Montessori Academy
Florida Atlantic University
FoodRight, Inc.
Fort Ward Observer
Fountain Creek Nature Center
FRESHFARM FoodPrints
FRIENDS of Great Salt Lake
Friends of MidColumbia River Wildlife Refuges
Friends of Pheasant Branch Conservancy
Friends of Reinstein Woods
Friends of the Kickapoo Valley Reserve
Friends of the National Arboretum
Friends of the North Fork of the Shenandoah River
Friends of the Rappahannock
Fulton High School
GaiaCene Services LLC
Garden To Table
Granby Elementary School Garden
Grand Families Lifeline of Texas
Granite City High School
Great Smoky Mountain Institute at Tremont
San Diego County Master Gardener Association
San Diego Zoo Global
Santa Cruz Gardens Elementary
Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group
Save Our Shores
School Board of Broward County
School of Engineering and Arts
School Sprouts Educational Gardens
Sequoia Elementary School
Sequoia Science Education
Severson Dells Nature Center
Seymour Marine Discovery Center
Short leaf Interpretive Services
Sienna ranch
Sierra Outdoor School
Small Wonders
Somatic Space
South Carolina Wildlife Federation
South Plantation High School
South Pointe High School
Southern Illinois University -Edwardsville
Southern Oregon University
SPI Sessions
Springbrook Nature Center
Sprout by Design
ST. GEORGE’S EPISCOPAL SCHOOL
St. Peter's Episcopal School
State College Friends School
Steamboat School District
Stoney Point
Striving for Zero Waste K-12 in Alameda County
Sullivan County Conservation District & Natural Resources Dept.
Sussex Academy Elementary School
Sustainable Living Center
Sustainable Nantucket
Take Root Café
Tanglewood Nature Center & Museum
Teach for America
Teatown Lake Reservation
Temple Beth El Temple School
Ten Strands
Texas Association for Environmental Education
Texas Butterfly Ranch
Texas Children in Nature
The Academy of Science - St. Louis
The Audubon Center at Riverlands
The Back 40 Schoolhouse
The Bird School Project
The College of New Jersey
The Ecology School
The Healthy Schools Project
The Kohala Center
The Monterey Bay Center for Environmental Literacy
The Nature Museum at Grafton
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Woodstock Union high school
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Yarrow Landscaping and Lawn Care LLC
Youth Environmental Alliance