STEP 4 Organize Planning Committee

After you have informed key people about your outdoor classroom plans and you have submitted your Alabama Outdoor Classroom (AOC) Enrollment Part I, you need to organize your planning committee. An outdoor classroom cannot be effectively sustained or used as an educational tool if only one or two teachers try to maintain it and use it by themselves. Tips for your planning committee are below including example committee positions that have provided an effective organization for many schools.

Planning Committee Checklist

At your very first planning committee meeting, your first instinct will be to discuss project plans. However, be sure to organize your planning committee first using the Planning Committee Checklist (see appendix) before starting the project development. The checklist addresses the planning committee members’ roles, when and where the committee will meet, along with other pertinent organizational information. In addition, you can use this checklist to organize your planning committee as it reconvenes each school year.

Example Planning Committee Positions & Responsibilities

When creating the positions on your planning committee, your committee will have to determine what works best for you to meet your specific needs. Your habitat team may have more positions, may have more than one person sharing particular tasks, may combine some positions, or may share these responsibilities evenly among the entire committee.

- **Habitat Project Leader** – Should be an effective organizer, have vision, and be able to delegate responsibilities and communicate effectively. Responsibilities include overseeing the development of the project, keeping the team focused and motivated, maintaining communication between the team members, and keeping notes at each meeting.
- **Habitat Consultant** – Should have knowledge of wildlife biology, wildlife management, or gardening for wildlife. Responsibilities include assisting with the development of the master plan including habitat resources for local wildlife.
- **Naturalist** – Should have a background in ecology or gardening, and knowledge of native plants. Responsibilities include assisting with garden design (including when and where to grow specific plants), gardening duties, habitat maintenance and planning.
- **Historian** – Could be a student, parent or teacher. Responsibilities include documenting project progress with “before” and “after” photos, a scrapbook, and/or video journal.
- **Publicist** – Could be school office staff, librarian, teacher, or parent. Responsibilities include writing press releases for local newspapers, taking photos, creating a newsletter or submitting articles to the PTA/PTO newsletter, and maintaining an outdoor classroom bulletin board in the school.
- **Volunteer Coordinator** – Could be PTA/PTO member or faculty member. Responsibilities include promoting volunteer involvement, matching volunteers to specific tasks, coordinating maintenance and work days, and sending thank you notes.
- **Bookkeeper** – Could be school bookkeeper, PTA/PTO treasurer, or Accounting Teacher. Responsibilities include collecting receipts, maintaining records of donated goods and services, tracking discounts, gathering invoices, and contacting the school bookkeeper or PTA/PTO treasurer for payment.
- **Fundraiser** – All committee members should once your outdoor classroom planning committee is organized, submit your AOC Enrollment Form Part II (see appendix) to the Alabama Wildlife Federation.
help with this task. Responsibilities include seeking monetary and in-kind donations from local businesses, researching and preparing grant proposals, and maintaining information for writing reports.

Curriculum Leader – Could be curriculum specialist; gifted/special education teacher; Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative (AMSTI) specialist; librarian; or teacher. Also, may have one representative from each grade level or department to create a curriculum committee. Responsibilities include compiling educational resources, activities and materials that can be used in the outdoor classroom site; putting together lists of activity ideas to be shared; and scheduling teacher training workshops.

Student Representative – One student (or a team of students) should participate in the planning details or assist with the creation and maintenance of one specific project within the habitat. (For example, a Boy Scout or Girl Scout may utilize the project to earn an “Eagle Scout” ranking or “Gold Badge.”)

Potential Outdoor Classroom Planning Committee Members
Try to include a variety of people on the planning committee including:

- school administrators, faculty, staff, and grounds personnel;
- students including 4-H, JMG, FFA, or other student club members;
- PT/PTO members, parent volunteers, grandparents, and family members;
- local agriculture and natural resource agency personnel; and
- community groups, Master Gardeners, Wildlife Stewards and city/county officials.

Planning Committee Tips…

- Try to include at least one teacher from each grade level at elementary schools, and at least one representative from each department for middle and high schools, to ensure that the outdoor classroom meets the needs of all students and teachers regardless of grade level or subject being taught.
- Spread the workload by delegating specific tasks to teachers and volunteers who are not serving on the committee. The more people involved, then the more support the project will have, the more it will be used, and the longer it will be sustained.
- Give volunteers very clear and limited tasks for a specific period of time.
- Have appointed leaders on your committee with clearly defined oversight responsibilities. For instance, planning committee members can serve as learning station project leaders.
- Establish term limits for each position to give more people a chance to serve on the committee and to reduce burn-out. Also stagger the term limits so that all of the positions do not expire at the same time and to maintain consistency within the committee.
- Streamline communication between all planning committee members and volunteers by setting up an email list, and have one person on the planning committee send out monthly updates to everyone on the list.
- Have one central location where copies of all outdoor classroom documents are kept including the master plan, project plans, maps, budgets, photos, newspaper articles, etc.
- Review the Planning Committee Checklist with your committee each August to establish the protocol and responsibilities for the upcoming year.
- Annually survey the teachers and parents at the beginning of each new school year to ensure that new teachers and parents have the opportunity to serve on the committee.
- The Outdoor Classroom Planning Committee should give updates at faculty and PT/PTO meetings so that everyone will be “up-to-date” and “in the loop,” especially at the beginning of each school year since the school will have new teachers and parents who might be interested in getting involved with the outdoor classroom.
Project Leader Tips…

**Stay organized!**
- Take notes and keep the committee organized and on-task.
- Email the meeting notes within a week of the meeting as a follow up for those who attended and as an update for those who were unable to attend.
- Send reminders about upcoming meetings a day or two prior to each meeting including an agenda as a reminder to those who will need to give updates on their projects or tasks.

**Delegate, delegate, delegate!**
- Delegate the other outdoor classroom development and maintenance responsibilities to committee members, teachers, students and other volunteers as needed.
- Divide the tasks into smaller, finite commitments to help you delegate some of the work, make the projects less overwhelming, and get more people involved.
- Keep a log of who volunteers to assist with various tasks so that you can easily follow up with them before the next meeting.
- Maintain an updated Master Plan (see Step 8) and Individual Project Plans (see Step 9) so that you’ll have a current “To Do List” and “Wish List” in case new volunteers or sponsors express interest in the project.

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**Teachable Moments:**

**Junior Master Gardener Program**

The Junior Master Gardeners (JMG) program, a 4-H youth gardening program, is available through the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. The mission of the JMG program is: To grow good kids by igniting a passion for learning, success and service through a unique gardening education.

Create an “Outdoor Classroom Student Club” or use an already existing student club such as the Junior Master Gardeners to assist the Outdoor Classroom Planning Committee.

The JMG program engages children in novel, hands-on, learning experiences that promote a love of gardening and develop an appreciation for the environment, encourages students to participate in community service and leadership development projects, and rewards them with certification and recognition.

* **JMG Level 1 Teacher/Leader Guide**
  Provides resources to teach about the wonderful world of gardening.

* **JMG Golden Ray Series – Wildlife Gardener**
  Helps children learn about the habitat needs of wildlife.

* **JMG Golden Ray Series – Literature in the Garden**
  Engages children through six powerful ecology-themed children’s books.

* **JMG Golden Ray Series – Health and Nutrition from the Garden**
  Provides activities that build knowledge of healthy nutritional habits.

* **JMG Level 2 – Operation Thistle: Seeds of Despair**
  Provides resources to teach about plant growth and development.

* **JMG Level 2 – Operation W.A.T.E.R.: Dr. Thistle Goes Underground**
  Focuses on soil, water resources, and conservation practices.

For more information, visit http://www.jmgkids.us/ or http://www.aces.edu/junior-master-gardener/.

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Megan McDuffee (on right), a JMG student at Blossomwood Elementary in Huntsville who loved to grow plants for their outdoor classroom using hydroponics, said “I have learned so much from working in our outdoor classroom. It is so important for everyone to learn how to care for our environment! Thank you for giving me this opportunity!”

Sherry Brewer
OC Spotlight: Locust Fork High (7-12th Grade), Blount County School

Locust Fork High’s Outdoor Classroom Committee includes faculty members from a variety of disciplines and community volunteers with various outdoor and natural resource backgrounds. Each committee member serves a variety of roles on the committee, and they work together as a team capitalizing on each person’s individual strengths and knowledge. Below are the committee members’ names and backgrounds.

- **Marcia Butler**, Special Education Teacher and Outdoor Classroom Coordinator – helps develop lesson plans that coordinate with the Alabama Course of Study Objectives and High School Graduation Exam, and serves as the faculty sponsor for the students’ AWF Club.

- **Sherry Brewer**, Junior High English Teacher – incorporates outdoor writing activities into the school’s curriculum and serves as faculty sponsor for the students’ Junior Master Gardener (JMG) Club.

- **Janice Stewart**, Junior High English Teacher – integrates creative writing activities with the outdoor learning stations.

- **Mary Matthews**, Teacher Aid and Master Gardener – serves as faculty co-sponsor for the students’ JMG Club, and helps to coordinate the development and use of the school’s raised beds and butterfly garden.

- **Wendy Ulrich**, Alabama Cooperative Extension System Agent Assistant for Blount County – provides technical knowledge for the outdoor learning stations, and conducts activities with the students on natural resource topics.

- **Kelly Matson**, Junior High Math Teacher – utilizes the outdoor classroom to teach practical math skills such as taking measurements and calculating volume.

- **Pam Goss**, Biology Teacher – uses the outdoor classroom to provide a learning laboratory to study science.

- **Toby Holmes**, History Teacher – uses the outdoor classroom to make learning about history locally relevant.

- **Francis Douglas**, Librarian – coordinates book purchases such as local wildlife field guides for the outdoor classroom activity kits and teaches a Basic Skills class using hands-on outdoor activities.

- **Peggy Harris**, Environmental Science Teacher – teaches her students about the complexity of environmental issues utilizing the various outdoor classroom learning stations.

- **Suzie Price**, Teachers Aid – assists with the paperwork associated with the Outdoor Classroom and AWF Club.

- **Susan Brown**, Special Ed Teacher – helps to incorporate outdoor activities for students with disabilities.

- **Tammy Lawler**, Parent and Substitute Teacher – a “worker bee” who helps with any outdoor projects and activities whenever she can.

Math classes utilize raised bed gardens to calculate and complete everyday, real-world math problems.

Alabama Cooperative Extension Agent, Wendy Ulrich, gives students the chance to touch and identify the “Skins and Skulls” of Alabama’s native wildlife during an outdoor classroom lesson at Locust Fork High.

This “seek and search” activity is a Language Arts project where teams of students are given a list of three items to locate in the outdoor classroom. They then take digital photos of their findings, sort the items by type, and write about the similarities and differences between the items. It’s a fun project for the students that utilizes the outdoors, technology, and teamwork.