



Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program

Site Evaluation Checklist



When surveying your campus for an Outdoor Classroom (OC) project site(s), bring a map of the school’s campus along with a camera to take photos of potential site(s). Note the following on your campus map and your checklist below:

- Site Availability** – Are there any future construction plans for your campus? _____
Mark off any sites on your campus where future construction projects such as new buildings, parking lots, playgrounds or portables are planned.
- Travel Time** – How far are the potential outdoor classroom site(s) from the classrooms? _____
The most important factor in selecting the best outdoor classroom site is to choose a site that is close to the school building and easily accessible (like an unused courtyard), so that teachers can reduce travel time and maximize activity time. The travel time needs to be a 5-minute walk or less; otherwise, the teachers will not use the outdoor classroom due to their hectic schedules.
- Accessibility to ALL Students** – Do you have students with special needs? _____
Does this site allow for wheelchair accessibility? _____
Make sure that your outdoor classroom site is accessible to all students.

Now that you know which sites are available, close to the school building with minimum travel time, and easily accessible to all students, mark your top two preferred sites on the map. Describe the location(s) below:

Potential OC Location #1: _____

Potential OC Location #2: _____

Review the following for each potential site:

- Already Existing Features** – Sometimes you can develop your outdoor classroom area(s) around features that already exist on your campus, which will help you save time and money, but these need to be in an area that is easily accessible with a quick travel time. Mark any useful pre-existing features such as the following on your map:
 - Classroom Seating such as a gazebo, pavilion, amphitheater, outdoor stage or benches
 - Raised Bed Gardens such as vegetable/herb gardens, butterfly gardens, or other themed gardens
 - Aquatic Study Areas such as a fish pond, frog pond, wetland, stream, or bog garden
 - Natural Areas such as a forest or meadow
 - Nature Trail such as a foot path through a meadow or woods
- Site Size** – What is the size of your site? Take measurements of the potential site(s) with your students.

Potential Site #1: Length - _____ Width - _____

Potential Site #2: Length - _____ Width - _____
- Directional Orientation** – Note the directional orientation (north, south, east and west) on your map to help determine which areas will receive the most sun and wind exposure.



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Site Evaluation Checklist (p2 of 4)



Review the following for each potential site:

- Sun Exposure** – Note how much sun exposure your potential outdoor classroom site(s) receive at different times of day and during different times of the year to help determine which species of plants to include. Southern or western exposures tend to receive the most sunlight and afternoon heat, whereas northern or northeastern exposures receive the least. Also, think about how the angle of the sun changes due to the tilt of the Earth during different seasons of the year. Mark your observations on your campus map and record your notes below:

- Erosion or Drainage Problems** – Avoid areas with erosion or drainage problems unless it is an area where the problem can be remediated by installing French drains, a rain garden, plants and/or by other means. If your school grounds have any issues with erosion or drainage, you can also contact your county Soil & Water Conservation office for suggestions. Note any areas with erosion or drainage issues on your campus map and explain the issues in more detail below:

- Water Sources** – Identify natural water sources like streams, wetlands or ponds for aquatic activities with students, and look for spigots, downspouts and sprinklers to water your plants. Mark the locations of these water sources on your map and record your notes below:

- Electricity Sources** – Look for outdoor electrical outlets in case you need access to electricity for an activity or a learning station (such as the pump on a pond). Mark these on your map.

- Soil Quality & Soil Type** – Contact your county Extension office or garden supply center for information and tools on how to conduct a soil test to help you determine your soil type (wet/dry, acidic/alkaline, clay/sandy/silt/rocky, etc.) and the species of plants and trees that can grow in your outdoor classroom site.

Soil Quality: _____

Soil Type: _____



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Review the following for each potential site:

- Watershed** – Map the watershed around your school including where run-off from buildings and paved areas collect and which areas drain quickly or are very dry. *Visit Auburn University’s Water Resources Center website (at <http://aes.auburn.edu/wrc/resource/rivers-of-alabama/>) for details about the rivers and watershed near you.*

Local Watershed Details: _____

- Topography** – Note the elevation and slope. For example, hills and rises may provide a good location for an amphitheater, but may not be easily accessible; whereas, low areas may collect water and remain “mucky,” making them ideal for an artificial wetland or rain garden. When building a nature trail on a slope, consider creating a trail that winds left and right with switchbacks to minimize the slope for wheelchairs and to reduce potential erosion. Record your topography observations below:

- Geology** – Research the geological characteristics found in your county; and, if possible, collect and identify different types of rocks around your school grounds. Note your county’s and school campus’s geological features below:

Campus Geological Features: _____

County Geological Features: _____

- Wind Direction** – If needed, plant evergreens to help protect your outdoor classroom area from potentially high winds, keeping in mind that weather systems typically travel from west to east across Alabama. Record your wind observations below:

- Foot Traffic** – Avoid areas that contain foot paths utilized by students, teachers, and the community, or formalize the path with a walkway to direct the traffic through the outdoor classroom site without disturbing it. Note where students will enter and exit the outdoor classroom site on your map, and record your observations below:



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Review the following for each potential site:

- Safety Hazards** – Check for any nearby hazards or safety concerns such as poison ivy, wasp nests, or busy streets around your outdoor classroom site. If there is a busy street nearby, consider installing a hedge of yaupon hollies or other type of evergreen bushes as a natural fence. Record any safety hazards that you observe below:

- Litter & Vandalism Issues** - Identify any potential sources for litter or vandalism around your outdoor classroom site. *(Review the Vandalism Reduction Tips on the OC Maintenance Tips webpage of AWF’s website.)*

Litter Concerns: _____

Vandalism Concerns: _____

- Low Maintenance** – Choose and design your outdoor classroom with minimal maintenance needs in mind. Remember, planting native plants and trees will reduce your watering responsibilities. Note any maintenance concerns that you have below:

- Non-native Invasive Plants** – If possible, identify and remove all non-native, invasive plants and replace them with natives. *(Review the Non-Native Invasive Plants information in the Schoolyard Habitat Tips section of AWF’s website.)* List the plants that should be removed below:

- Neighbors** – Note the land use on adjacent properties. Neighbors who also manage their property for wildlife can be beneficial, whereas businesses and streets may create danger zones and/or loud noise. If there is a busy street nearby, consider planting a line of evergreens such as American or yaupon hollies to create a natural fence-line if needed. Record observations about neighboring property below:

- Site Approval** – Once an outdoor classroom site is chosen, ask your local Outdoor Classroom Consultant for a Site Approval Form and Google Earth map of the site. These must be reviewed and signed by your principal and your school system’s Buildings and Maintenance Supervisor to verify where any underground hazards or utility lines are located so the utilities can be marked on the outdoor classroom schematic and avoided during the construction phase.

*The Alabama Outdoor Classroom Program is a partnership between:
Alabama Wildlife Federation, Alabama Cooperative Extension System,
And Alabama Department of Conservation & Natural Resources*