

# 2022 Youth Outdoor Policy Trends Report

*Prepared by the Youth Outdoor Policy Partnership*

The [Youth Outdoor Policy Partnership](#) tracks state policies that support getting young people outside everywhere they live, learn, work, and play. This report highlights policy trends and summarizes specific bills and initiatives that were passed or enacted in 2022. We are sharing these legislative successes as examples and resources to help replicate good ideas in other states.

The policies included in this trend report:

- address outdoor access and equity, outdoor learning and education, wellness, and/or funding
- focus on youth or have a significant impact on youth

For each section, we have included a summary of some of the existing policies and outlined specific policy advancements from 2022. The bills included in this document were identified by the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators, the North American Association for Environmental Education, Children & Nature Network, and Meridian Institute as examples of policy supporting youth outdoor engagement. As a partnership we do not endorse any specific bills or policy ideas, but are sharing these as inspiration for local champions and legislators considering what might work in your state. This is not a comprehensive list and we welcome suggestions for additions or corrections at [dylan@ncelenviro.org](mailto:dylan@ncelenviro.org).

The 2022 State Legislative Sessions saw continued progress and momentum around youth outdoor education and engagement. Even year sessions, such as 2022, are considered “short sessions” where many states meet for a limited duration and some, like Nevada and Texas, don’t meet at all. Despite these limitations, states invested in outdoor learning opportunities, created new outdoor school programs, and set policy goals around equitable outdoor access. New federal bills have also been introduced that build on state successes or provide funding to support ongoing efforts. You can view a more comprehensive list of outdoor engagement policies considered by states in our [2022 Outdoor Policy Legislation Tracker](#).

## Outdoor Access and Equity

The pandemic underscored the importance of outdoor access but also showcased the inequities in who is able to spend time in nature. Recent state efforts have worked to overcome barriers to outdoor access through funding opportunities--such as Outdoor Equity Funds in New Mexico and Colorado--and by establishing new trails and green spaces. In 2022, three states enacted policies to institutionalize equitable outdoor access, provide new opportunities for community trails, and expand park access for veterans.

- **California** ([AB 30](#)) establishes the Equitable Outdoor Access Act, which sets forth the state’s commitment to ensuring all Californians can benefit from, and have meaningful access to, the state’s rich cultural and natural resources. The bill would declare that it is

state policy, among other things, to ensure that all Californians have equitable opportunities to safe and affordable access to nature and access to the benefits of nature.

- **Colorado** ([HB22-1104](#)) requires transmission providers to provide informational resources and notify local governments regarding the potential for powerline trails when planning for the expansion or construction of transmission corridors
- **Utah** ([HB 155](#)) expands the State Parks Honor Pass Program to all veterans with any percentage of disability rating from the Veterans Administration.

## Outdoor Learning and Education

Providing students with outdoor and environmental learning opportunities continues to be a growing focus at the state level. Two states that have already established themselves as national leaders are continuing to add programs to support youth throughout the state. Maryland, which instituted the [first state environmental literacy graduation requirement](#) in 2011, has extended its funding for green schools efforts and also created a program to fund composting programs and education. Washington created a new outdoor school program similar to one in Oregon and this comes a year after the state became the [first to formally license](#) outdoor preschool programs.

- **Maryland** ([SB0383/HB0531](#)) extends through fiscal year 2028 dedicated state budget funding for increasing the number of green schools in the State; and extending through calendar year 2029 the annual evaluation of the impact of the funds appropriated under the Act on increasing the number of green schools in the State.
- **Maryland** ([SB0124/HB0150](#)) establishes the Grant Program to Reduce and Compost School Waste to award grants to county boards of education and public schools to develop and implement programs for reducing food waste and to establish composting of pre- and post-consumer waste.
- **Washington** ([HB2078](#)) establishes the outdoor school for all program and establishes the outdoor learning grant program to support educational experiences for students in Washington public schools.
- **New Mexico** ([SB32](#)) provides funds to the state Department of Public Education for an Outdoor Learning Specialist and Outdoor Learning Assistant, as well as funding to support high quality professional learning and materials to create and expand outdoor learning opportunities.
- **Georgia** - The Georgia Department of Education approved \$75,000 to create a grant program that can be used by schools to provide educator training and supplies to increase outdoor teaching capacity, improve outdoor learning spaces at schoolyards, and fund visits to nature centers. The grant fund was recommended by a bipartisan Senate Study Committee on Outdoor Learning ([SR 203](#), 2021).

## Outdoor Wellness

States continue to explore opportunities for promoting time outside as a wellness opportunity. Recent efforts, such as those in [New York](#), have often focused on specific user groups like veterans. In 2022, Colorado passed legislation that explicitly allows children to engage in outdoor play and

time in nature on their own. The bipartisan bill was in response to [numerous instances](#) of the police being called about children playing outside unsupervised that risked discouraging parents and guardians from sending their children out to play.

- **Colorado** ([HB22-1090](#)) clarifies the law to allow a child reasonable independence to engage in activities without finding that the child is abused or neglected, such as outdoor play and walking to school.

## Funding Initiatives

Funding is often a limiting factor in terms of states executing environmental and education goals. However, recent budget cycles have seen a renewed focus on investing in outdoor spaces and learning opportunities as a result of people spending more time outdoors during the pandemic. This increase also coincides with an influx of federal funding such as the American Rescue Plan, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and the Inflation Reduction Act. Notably the Land and Water Conservation Fund was recently permanently authorized and has seen higher funding levels. In 2022, three states took steps to prioritize and direct funding toward outdoor spaces.

- **California** ([AB-1789](#)) requires the California Recreational Trails System Plan to recommend priorities for funding to improve and expand non motorized natural surface trails.
- **Maine** ([LD 700](#)) dedicates excess revenue from user fees to a nonlapsing dedicated revenue account to be used for capital improvements at state parks and historic sites. This account may also be used to match federal allocations such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund.
- **Maryland** ([SB0541/HB0727](#)) addresses infrastructure, capacity, and accessibility needs within the Maryland Park Service and State parks by systematizing infrastructure management and critical maintenance; reviewing and increasing total full-time park employees; and developing capital improvement and long-range strategic plans.

## Federal Policy

States are often referred to as the “laboratories of democracy” where ideas can be tested and refined and state policy often inspires federal action. Additionally, states play a pivotal role in carrying out federal programs in both deploying federal funding and collaborating with the federal government on state plans. Here are current federal policy proposals and programs that relate to state efforts around youth outdoor engagement:

- **Living Schoolyards Act** ([S.4993](#)) ([info](#)) would establish an Outdoor Learning Spaces Grants program, administered by the U.S. Department of Education, to allow schools or districts to create outdoor classrooms and learning spaces.
- **No Child Left Inside Act** : ([S.4041/H.R.7486](#)) would provide funds to states and school districts for the implementation of statewide environmental literacy plans. The 2022 version of the bill includes, for the first time, a pilot program for outdoor school for all models.

- **Outdoors for All Act** ([S.2887/H.R.5413](#)) would expand outdoor recreational opportunities in underserved communities by guaranteeing funding for the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP). ORLP helps economically disadvantaged urban communities establish and renovate parks.
- **Indian Youth Service Corps (IYSC)** announced [guidelines](#) and \$3.3 million in launch funding. IYSC, authorized in 2019 ([S.47](#)), provides outdoor opportunities for Indigenous youth through conservation and restoration of tribal or Federal lands.
- **Land and Water Conservation Funding** (LWCF) nearly hit \$1 billion in 2022 and will exceed \$1 billion in 2023. The Great American Outdoors Act ([H.R.1957](#)) permanently allocated \$900 million annually; GOMESA ([P.L.109-432](#)) National Park Formula Grants provide an estimated \$84.1 million in 2022 and \$125.2 million in 2023.
- **Nature in Communities Committee** ([M.O.U.](#)) brings together 10 Federal agencies to strengthen and sustain locally led conservation and park projects in nature-deprived communities.
- **Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation** ([FICOR](#)) improves access, quality, and affordability of outdoor recreation. Re-launching the FICOR restores the council behind the [Every Kid Outdoors Pass](#) and [recreation.gov](#).

### Three Exciting Ideas

It's not uncommon for policy ideas to be introduced multiple times before becoming law. The following concepts were considered in the previous legislative session and are likely ones to watch for the future.

1. **Outdoor Learning:** In Georgia, [SB 603](#) would have established an outdoor learning spaces pilot program to determine best practices and design standards for outdoor learning spaces.
2. **Outdoor Equity:** In Alaska, [HCR 4](#) would have urged the Governor to establish an Office of Outdoor Equity in the state.
3. **Outdoor Education:** In New York, [S5025A](#) would have created a legislative task force on outdoor environmental education and recreation to foster stewardship and conservation of the environment, wise use of natural resources, and effect health benefits of time spent in nature.