



# 2023 TRENDS REPORT YOUTH OUTDOOR POLICY PLAYBOOK



Prepared by the Youth Outdoor Policy Partnership

The [Youth Outdoor Policy Partnership](#) highlights state policies helping youth spend meaningful time outside at school, home, work, and play. Our annual trends report shares innovative ideas in youth outdoor engagement to inspire legislators, advocates, communities, and youth to replicate, rethink, and collaborate to build equitable youth outdoor opportunities.

Outdoor policy saw unprecedented growth in 2023, with over 200 bills on outdoor recreation, education, access, and equity introduced across 40 U.S. states and at least 57 policies already enacted. Please see our [2023 Outdoor Policy Legislation Tracker](#) for a comprehensive list of state outdoor policies.

This report summarizes key policy trends, initiatives, and specific bills enacted in 2023 that have a significant impact on youth and:

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These bills were identified by Youth Outdoor Policy Partnership, including the [Children & Nature Network](#), the [North American Association for Environmental Education](#), the [National Caucus of Environmental Legislators](#), and our newest partner, [Nuestra Tierra](#). Nuestra Tierra brings extensive outdoor equity policy and community engagement knowledge, including leading the [Outdoor F.U.T.U.R.E. Initiative](#) and championing the New Mexico Outdoor Equity Fund.

As a partnership, we do not endorse any specific bills or policy ideas. We share these examples of youth outdoor policy to inspire local champions and legislators to consider what might work in their state. This is not a comprehensive list, and we welcome suggestions for additions or corrections at [grant@ncelenviro.org](mailto:grant@ncelenviro.org).

## Your Feedback Matters

The Youth Outdoor Policy Partnership is expanding our resources to best empower community-engaged, community-driven, and inclusive youth outdoor opportunities. Please consider [completing a brief survey](#) to help us make resources that include, support, and engage you.

## Outdoor Access and Equity

With the success of Outdoor Equity and No Child Left Inside programs in [California](#), [Colorado](#), [Minnesota](#), [New Mexico](#), and [Washington](#), states are increasingly turning to equitable outdoor access as public health, economic opportunity, and environmental justice solutions, especially in mitigating climate crisis inequity. NCEL's new [Outdoors as a Climate Solution Briefing Book](#) highlights how states are advancing climate equity with outdoor policy.

**12 Bills** Enacted in  
**Nine States.**



**57+ Bills** Introduced in  
**25 States.**

States enacted programs, funds, and incentives to increase greenspace equity, establish youth outreach programs, and laid groundwork to understand and build accessibility.

2023 saw increased interest in disability inclusion in the outdoors overall. While federal laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act require many public spaces to be accessible, many outdoor recreation spaces have not yet met [legal requirements](#), and nature-based outdoor spaces (e.g. trails) are sometimes interpreted to be [exempt from federal accessibility requirements](#).

- **Colorado** [H.B.1296](#) created a task force to study disability inclusion with a focus on outdoor equity.
- **Maryland** [S.B.923/H.B.503](#) established a Greenspace Equity Program to increase equitable access to quality green spaces in overburdened & underserved areas.
- **New Mexico** [S.B.392](#) established youth outreach programs to promote interest in outdoor recreation, stewardship & conservation funded by offering the opportunity to donate during Department of Game and Fish purchases.
- **North Carolina** [S.B.22](#) established and authorizes funding a Youth Outdoor Engagement Council to expand youth access to outdoor recreation in nature. SB 22 repurposes an existing Outdoor Heritage Council and program funds, including authorization to hire staff.

## Outdoor Learning and Education

Focus on outdoor education increasingly overlapped with outdoor equity, with education policies trending towards reaching nature-deprived, underserved, and historically excluded youth through outdoor learning in schools. Climate education gained support and at least six states considered changes to environmental and climate education.

**Six Bills** Enacted in  
**Nine States.**



**36 Bills** Introduced in  
**18 States.**

Building on the success of the Outdoor School for All program and the state's efforts to require recess during the COVID-19 pandemic, Washington continued to lead on youth outdoor policy by requiring outdoor recess.

Recess can be [up to 70%](#) of a child's daily physical activity and outdoor recess boosts [academic, social, and physical wellness](#). However, [one in five](#) low income elementary school students receive no recess at all. Washington will require all public elementary schools to offer 30 minutes of daily recess that must be outdoors when possible and work to support schools without adequate outdoor facilities.

[Outside for 5](#) launched in 2023, empowers educators and advocates to commit to supporting children getting outside for at least five minutes a day.

- **Maine** [LD 1682](#) established an experiential Sea and Farm to School Program, connecting schools with real-world educational opportunities and local food.
- **Maryland** [H.B.525](#) established a pilot program to license outdoor preschools
- **Nevada** [A.B.164](#) will study using state outdoor recreation resources to incorporate outdoor education into public schools.
- **Oregon** [HB 2717](#) allows outdoor childcare facilities (e.g. daycares) to be licensed and will set guidelines for safe outdoor childcare.
- **Washington** [S.B.5257](#) requires a minimum of 30 minutes of daily recess, outdoors when possible.

## Outdoor Wellness

Time outdoors is a powerful public health tool offering some of the greatest benefits to youth and children. As climate change [impacts youth most severely](#), youth health and wellness [increasingly depends on time outdoors](#). States are turning to the outdoor policy to build childhood and youth health, address outdoor safety inequity, and promote lifelong health through the outdoors.

**Six Bills** Enacted in  
**Six States.**



**18 Bills** Introduced in  
**16 States.**

After further improving a robust state green schools program in 2022 (MD [SB 528](#)), Maryland continued to lead on outdoor wellness by closing a critical safety gap in 2023. **Maryland** [HB 303](#) adopts a uniform, evidence-based pool code closing loopholes that disproportionately endangered youth of color.

Systemic racism and resulting lack of access has created a legacy of inequality in water recreation facilities and experience; Despite overall accidental drownings steadily declining, youth of color remain [up to twice as likely](#) to die by accidental drowning compared to white youth. **California** [AB 1056](#) is expected to fund free water safety and swimming lessons for underserved youth. Uniformly safe facilities and access to swimming lessons would prevent [up to 90%](#) of youth drowning deaths.

- **California** [AB 1056](#) would fund free water safety & swimming lessons for underserved youth.
- **Illinois** [H.B.1526](#) created an Outdoors RX grant program in the Department of Health to fund improving health and wellness through outdoor access.
- **Louisiana** [S.R.84](#) created a task force to improve childhood health. State experts identified links between low state-wide childhood wellness and a lack of access to the outdoors, healthy foods, and safe physical activity, especially in summers and close to home.
- **Maryland** [HB 303](#) clarified and strengthened pool safety disproportionately endangering youth of color.

## Outdoor Funding & Governance

Funding and leadership are the most common limiting factors in 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 and in response to climate change.

**Six Bills** Enacted in  
**Six States.**



**18 Bills** Introduced in  
**16 States.**

States continue to expand outdoor recreation leadership with over 20 state Offices, Commissions, and Directors of Recreation offering guidance, support, and state-level advocacy for outdoor recreation in 2023. Utah and Arizona both invested in long-term programs to increase outdoor recreation capacity.

States also identified opportunities to streamline and improve other forms of governance, investing in strategic plans to maximize existing and future state investments in the outdoors.

- **Arizona** [H.B.2505](#) continued a commission to assess, set criteria, and distribute funding to improve and expand outdoor recreation infrastructure
- **Alabama** [S.B.298](#) established funding to strategically develop and connect existing trail resources.
- **New Mexico** [S.B.9](#) established over \$150 million in permanent and legacy funds to conserve and expand access to the state's most important natural, cultural, and historical resources, including permanently funding the New Mexico Outdoor Equity Fund ([S.B.462](#)).
- **Nevada** [A.B.164](#) repurposes an outdoor recreation commission to study integrating outdoor recreation into state curriculum.
- **Utah** [H.B.224](#) enacts an initiative and dedicates funding to strategically improve and expand outdoor recreation statewide and **Wyoming** [H.B.74](#) established a \$6 million perpetual trust fund for outdoor recreation and tourism.

## 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.1538](#)) ([info](#)), also introduced in 2022, 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.1239/H.R.2784](#)) ([info](#)), also introduced in 2022, 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.448/H.R.1065](#)), also introduced in 2022, would expand outdoor recreation equity by guaranteeing funding for the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP). ORLP helps economically disadvantaged urban and tribal communities establish and renovate parks.
- **Land and Water Conservation Funding** (LWCF) 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 will exceed \$125 million in 2023.
- **America the Beautiful Challenge** (ATB) will distribute [\\$116 million](#) to protect, conserve, restore, and expand access to nature.

## 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 Access

**Wisconsin** [A.B.30](#) would have waived state parks parking fees for families enjoying a federal [Every Kid Outdoors Pass](#), which offers free access to National Parks to fourth graders.

2

### Outdoor Equity

**Nevada** ([A.B.84](#)), **Arizona** ([A.B.2237](#)), **Maine** ([L.D.25](#)) and **South Dakota** ([H.B.1142](#)) all considered free state parks access for tribal citizens inspired by [Minnesota](#) honoring tribal treaty rights.

3

### Outdoor Learning & Education

**New Hampshire** [S.B.266](#), **New Jersey** [A.5313](#), & **New Mexico** [S.B.289](#) would have required outdoor education to be included in state curriculum.

4

### Outdoor Wellness

**California** ([S.B.499](#)) would require schools to protect students from extreme heat, including providing shade, low heat surfaces, and greenery for safe outdoor recess and outdoor class time.

5

### Outdoor Funding

**Wyoming** ([H.B.48](#)) would have established an active transportation and recreation grant program to increase wellness with more connectivity for cycling, walking, and riding.

6

### Outdoor Governance

**Illinois** [S.B.1369](#), **Massachusetts** [H.756](#), and **Tennessee** [S.B.375/H.B.1337](#) would have created offices of outdoor recreation, already enacted in 20+ states to lead state outdoor recreation.