Outdoor Learning Experiences (OLE) Planning Reference Guide

The **Louisiana Student Standards for Science (LSSS)** reflect a shift towards students engaging in scientific practices and deep sensemaking. The shift exceeds memorizing concepts. Students are now expected to develop an understanding of scientific ideas and the processes scientists and engineers go through to learn about and design solutions for the natural world. Opportunities for learners to engage in those scientific ideas and practices arise when learners spend time in places designated for outdoor learning. Students make meaningful connections to scientific concepts, fostering a lifelong appreciation for science and interest in science careers.

Purpose

This document is designed to support educators in implementing outdoor learning experiences (OLE). It should be used alongside the identified outdoor learning lessons in the high-quality instructional materials (HQIM) and when customizing HQIM lessons to include additional outdoor learning opportunities. The guide offers key considerations for before, during, and after outdoor learning experiences, helping to address common concerns about taking classes outside.

Definition

Outdoor learning experiences (OLE) allow students to engage with science concepts in a setting different from their traditional classroom environment and routines, allowing them to connect with nature and develop new skills. They encourage exploration of the natural world through sensory and investigative practices, enriching students' understanding and practice of the three dimensions of science. These experiences foster field-based science education in outdoor settings and allow students to engage with local phenomena that are meaningful and relevant to their lives. During an OLE, students engage in science and engineering practices (SEPs) and think through the lens of the crosscutting concepts (CCCs) to figure out disciplinary core ideas (DCIs) to explain the HQIM phenomenon.

Planning Considerations

It is essential to carefully plan for the anticipated outcomes of the outdoor learning experience and consider potential situations that may arise. This guide aims to support these objectives.

Logistics

Thoughtful planning of all aspects of the outdoor learning experience in advance will promote a safe and effective environment for both the educator and their students.

Safety

Before engaging in any outdoor learning experience, it is highly encouraged to contact the school system's safety officer, maintenance supervisor, and legal counsel for appropriate safety guidance.[1]

Location

1. Weather Considerations

- ☐ Assess current and forecasted weather conditions.
- ☐ Identify an alternate location as a contingency plan.

2. Outdoor Area Evaluation

- ☐ Determine the size of the outdoor area.
- ☐ Ensure the space is conducive to student learning. Identify any barriers to physical access.

3. Student Boundaries

- ☐ Establish clear boundaries for student activities.
- ☐ Ensure you always maintain visual contact with all students within the designated area.

4. Unobstructed Views

- ☐ Select a location that provides unobstructed views of all students.

5. Utilizing Smaller Zones

- ☐ If using a smaller section within a larger area, mark the specific zone designated for student exploration.

6. Visual Cues for Boundaries

- ☐ Use visual cues to indicate boundaries for student activities.

7. Site Map

- ☐ Prepare a site map to aid in navigation and planning.

8. Mode of Transportation

- ☐ Determine if students will need to be transported by
  - walking or
  - bus.

[1] *This document does not contain offical legal or safety advice. Please contact your school system for specific guidance related to safety.*

- ☐ Assess the logistics for the chosen mode of transportation.
- ☐ Consider supervision during transit.

Timing

1. Duration of the OLE

- ☐ Assess whether the OLE can be completed within a single class period.

2. Travel Time

- ☐ Factor in the time required to reach the outdoor location and return to the classroom.

3. Total Time Allocation

- ☐ Determine that the total time needed for the OLE, including travel time, does not negatively impact the pacing of the HQIM.

Preparation Before the Outdoor Learning Experience

Preparation before bringing students outdoors to learn is critical to the success of the experience. Outdoor learning, while immensely beneficial, can look different than classroom instruction. If feasible, actively participate in various aspects of the outdoor learning experience before implementing it as a lesson for students. This approach has proven to be immensely beneficial.

Materials

1. Teacher Preparation

- ☐ Consider the materials needed to guide your preparation:
  - Annotate the original HQIM lesson to ensure the outdoor activity is aligned with the lesson's learning objective(s), while maintaining the intent and rigor of the HQIM. If customizing a lesson, refer to the **Analyzing and Customizing OLE section in the HQIM Evaluation Tool**.

2. HQIM Connection to OLE

- ☐ Annotate the HQIM lesson to highlight specific connections to the outdoor learning that students will experience. HQIM resources, which may help facilitate connections, include:
  - videos;
  - pictures;
  - articles; or
  - questions.

3. OLE Required Materials

- ☐ Determine what materials students need to bring for the outdoor learning experience.
- ☐ Create "exploration packs" containing pertinent OLE materials. Examples include
  - lesson materials;
  - writing utensils;
  - clipboards; and
  - zip-top or reusable zipper bags for any collections students may need to bring back to the classroom.

4. Instructions and Documentation

- ☐ Develop a clear and consistent strategy for gaining students' attention and effectively redirecting them during the OLE.
- ☐ Allow time for students to preview how and where they will document their learning during the activity.

5. Time Management

- ☐ For shorter class periods, utilize time the day before to prepare any needed materials for both the teacher and students.

6. Documentation for Administrators

- ☐ Document all details related to outdoor lessons in lesson plans for administrator review.

7. Communication with the Attendance Office

- ☐ Inform the front office of the location and the duration of the OLE.
- ☐ Ensure the secretary has a way to contact you while you are outside of your regular classroom environment.

Preparing the Students for the Outdoor Learning Experience

1. Student Responsibilities

- ☐ Discuss the upcoming outdoor experience with students at least one day before the OLE. Explain that although learning will occur outside, the goal is to remain focused on the learning objective(s).
- ☐ Assist students in establishing their role(s) during the OLE (e.g., data collector, recorder, timekeeper, etc.).
- ☐ Provide students with opportunities to connect prior learning with the OLE.
- ☐ Have the students create questions/predictions they will answer/verify during the OLE.
- ☐ Determine how this information will be communicated and shared with students who miss the OLE.

2. Engagement Boundaries

- ☐ Share physical boundaries regarding how and where students may engage with the outdoor learning environment.

3. Discussion and Documentation

- ☐ Preview how students will be documenting their learning while outside. Using materials from the HQIM or a simple notice and wonder chart is ideal so students are familiar with the tools they will be using.
- ☐ Provide students with discussion prompts and moves in advance to facilitate meaningful conversations. The Science Talk Moves reference sheet contains examples that can be used.

Experiencing Outdoor Learning with Students

Students will have varying levels of comfort when learning outdoors and respond differently to the new learning environment. Providing a framework for managing unexpected situations and addressing student concerns about outdoor activities ensures a structured, engaging, and successful outdoor learning experience.

During the OLE

1. Communication of Procedures and Expectations

- ☐ Remind students of the procedures and expectations discussed before going outside. This may include what to do if they encounter a problem or significant distraction.
- ☐ Restate the learning objectives and remind students of the questions they created and hope to solve during the OLE.
- ☐ Direct students to use the materials in their exploration pack to document their observations and learning. This may include the discussion prompts and group roles established in the classroom.

2. Cues for Engagement

- ☐ Communicate effectively with students using physical and verbal cues. Consider using a whistle or other communication tool to signal students' attention and neon construction ribbons or cones to designate areas.
- ☐ Use timers to help manage activity duration; timing is crucial for outdoor activities.

3. Early Finisher Activities

- ☐ Prepare "early finisher" activities, such as allowing students to investigate additional questions or observations related to the phenomenon, to keep students engaged and focused on the learning objective(s).

Returning to the Classroom

A critical component of any outdoor learning experience is ensuring a smooth transition back to the classroom while reinforcing the learning objective(s). Classroom follow-up after an outdoor learning experience allows students to synthesize new knowledge and connect to the studied phenomenon.

1. Making Connections and Moving Learning Forward

- ☐ Provide students with the opportunity to capture and reflect on their new learning independently.
- ☐ Allow students to share what they learned and discuss any additional questions with a partner, small group, and/or whole group.
- ☐ Refer to the HQIM for assessment opportunities and evaluation criteria. Examples include
  - look/listen for(s);
  - self-evaluation;
  - science writing;
  - modeling; or
  - exit tickets.

2. Navigate to the next lesson in HQIM.

References

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