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# CREATING AN OUTDOOR LEARNING AREA



## Acknowledgements

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The VSB acknowledges with gratitude that our schools and learning centres are located on the unceded and traditional territories of the Coast Salish peoples – sk̓w̓wú7mesh (Squamish), selílwitlh (Tseil-Waututh), and xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam) nations.

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## Introduction

School grounds can be a wonderful extension of the classroom and can be used in varied ways for formal and informal learning. The Vancouver School District recognizes the importance of making use of our extensive grounds for greater educational value. The creation of Outdoor Learning Areas (a.k.a. Outdoor Classrooms) on school grounds can enhance academic achievement through the integration of hands-on experiences in diverse subjects such as math, science, art, and environmental education. By extending learning to the outdoor spaces on their school grounds, students begin to develop a broader sense of connection to the world beyond their playground.

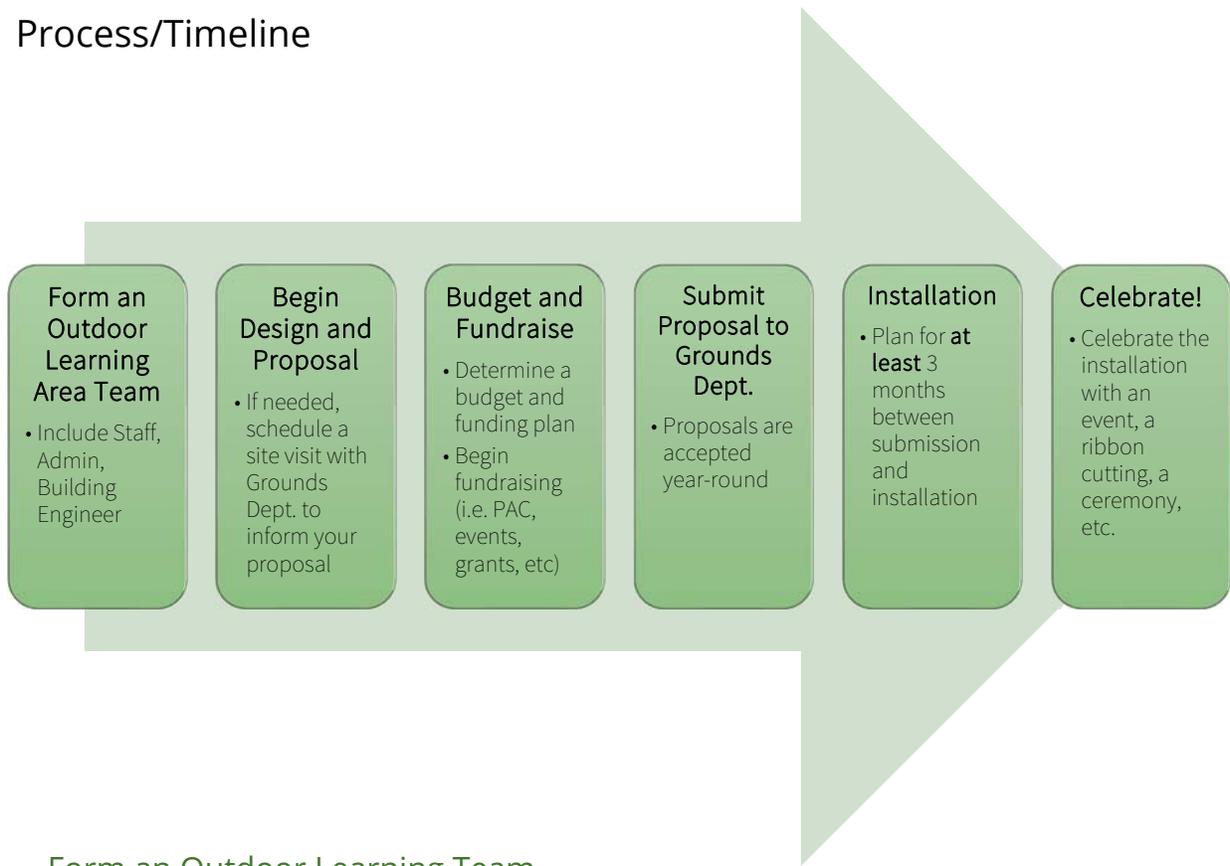
## Guiding Principles

The District's Grounds Department has developed the following standards for all new Outdoor Learning Areas (OLA) on school grounds:

1. OLA infrastructure must be VSB-approved (i.e. concrete picnic tables and/or large stones)
2. The design and layout of OLAs must be approved by the Grounds Department prior to the purchase and installation of any infrastructure on school grounds.
3. Stones and tables must be no less than 4 feet apart and, if on an unpaved area, must be on crushed limestone padding. This ensures that the area is universally accessible by people with mobility aids and allows for year-round use while avoiding mud and damage to surrounding turf.

Unique situations may allow for variances from this guide but must be approved by the Grounds Department prior to installation.

## Process/Timeline



### I. Form an Outdoor Learning Team

An OLA is a big investment for a school community, and it has the potential to be a vibrant asset for the whole school. Discuss the idea of an OLA with students, teachers, school administration, building engineers, and parents.

For the project to be successful, it will need a committed team to design, develop, and fundraise the right OLA for the school. Determine the best team for the project – this could include students, teachers, parents, administrators, and building engineers. Each school’s team will look a little different depending on what each school needs. A team leader with the time and energy to dedicate to the project will be essential.

Things to consider while forming your team and developing your proposal:

- Vision and goals for the OLA
- Who should be part of the team (i.e. other staff, students, parents)
- The location and size of the OLA
- Who will be the liaison to VSB Grounds Department (i.e. Principal or Vice-Principal)
- How the school will pay for the installation (i.e. PAC support, grants, local businesses, etc.)

Review this guide thoroughly to understand what is required for the proposal to be submitted. See [Appendix A](#) for Frequently Asked Questions to help guide your team’s discussion.

## II. Develop a proposal

An OLA proposal addresses the following:

- A. Project Scope
- B. Timeline
- C. Budget and Funding
- D. Design
- E. Maintenance Plan

**Please note:** Once you have a rough draft of a proposal, contact the Grounds Department to see if a site visit is needed **before** submitting your final proposal. This visit will allow Grounds staff to provide valuable feedback on your plan, to offer suggestions about potential changes, and to ensure that your final proposal will include all the essential information required for approval.

Outdoor Learning Area proposals are reviewed year-round as workload capacity allows.

### A. Project Scope

These questions may help you outline the project scope:

- What are the goals for the OLA? Include curricular goals, as well as potential links to VSB strategic goals (i.e. Engage our learners through innovative teaching and learning practices). See the [VSB Strategic Plan](#) and the [Environmental Sustainability Plan](#) for District goals you might link to.
- Who will be using the OLA and when will they access it? Will it be accessible by all members of the school community?
- How much money is available for the project? Are all the required components funded or will a phased approach be used to gradually make additions?

## B. Timeline

The timeline should include time required to:

- Complete the design and drawings of the OLA
- Review the design with your team
- Have a site visit with VSB Grounds staff and allow them time to review and approve the proposal
- Fundraise
- Procure and install the infrastructure

It is helpful to think about when you hope to have the OLA *finished* and then work backwards. Be realistic – planning and implementation usually takes longer than anticipated.

Sample Timeline:	
Months 1-3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Form team and develop vision and project scope</li><li>• Approach PAC and other possible funders to determine what funds are available and how much funding might be needed</li><li>• Draft OLA design</li><li>• Request input from Grounds Department</li></ul>
Months 4-5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Final site visit from Grounds Department</li><li>• Submit funding proposals &amp; apply for grants</li></ul>
Month 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Site preparation by Grounds Dept.</li><li>• Installation of stones and/or tables</li></ul>

## C. Budget and Funding

The VSB **does not** fund outdoor learning areas. Each school’s team will need to identify potential funding sources to cover the costs. You should have at least some funding secured and a funding plan in place before submitting your proposal, as the installation work cannot start until the funding is secured.

Potential Expenses	Funding options
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• OLA infrastructure such as:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Stone benches</li><li>○ Stone podium</li><li>○ Concrete picnic tables</li></ul></li><li>• Installation expenses</li><li>• Site surface prep (see pg. 10)</li><li>• Portable outdoor education materials such as:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ “Sit upons” for wet weather</li><li>○ Easel or chalk board</li><li>○ Student clipboards</li></ul></li><li>• Shade trees (subject to approval)</li><li>• Other permanent installations (i.e. outdoor blackboard, shade sails; all subject to approval)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Apply for grants</li><li>• PAC funds</li><li>• Other school fundraising initiatives</li></ul>

## D. Design

Design matters. Consider who will use the outdoor learning area and how they will use it. What types of activities might take place there? What materials will be necessary to ensure the outdoor learning area is well-used by the school? Are there unique aspects to your school grounds that might add to your outdoor learning area design?



*A simple sketch to show this OLA layout.*



*The stones are staggered to preserve sightlines.*

Consider these important design and installation concerns:

- Location
  - Proximity to school building
  - Access to appropriate exits and hallways
  - Exposure to sunlight and shade
  - Distance from noise sources (i.e. traffic)
  - Sightlines from school and neighbours
  
- Layout
  - Is the outdoor learning area accessible to **all** students, including those with limited mobility? Four feet of space between stones/benches is required.
  - How big is the OLA? You don't want the teachers to have to shout for everyone to hear them.
  - How will the seating be arranged? Our district has examples of OLAs with circular, u-shaped, and staggered student seating, as well as combinations of stones, stone benches and picnic tables.
  - Is the OLA accessed by a pathway or sidewalk? If not, you'll need to include a path in the scope of the project.
  - Which way will the students face? Is there shade? Is there street noise?
  
- Safety
  - Choose safe landscaping options – avoid tripping or slipping hazards
  - Use only materials and suppliers approved by VSB Grounds
  - Review what is **not** permitted on VSB school grounds (See [Appendix A](#))
  - Avoid opportunities for vandalism (e.g. loose parts, easily broken materials, elements that provide access to school building roofs, etc.)
  
- Phases of Installation
  - Developing in phases allows the team to save money up front, evaluate how the OLA works, and to make changes in future phases. However, this approach can be more expensive overall, as the installation of large stones and picnic tables requires a crane truck for each phase.



*Unique layout integrating the OLA and garden boxes.*



*Semi-circular layout with a podium stone, all on a paved area.*



*A crane truck is required to place the specialty stones. This circular layout is on a gravel field.*

## E. Maintenance

Most maintenance of an outdoor learning area is up to the school's Building Engineer. During routine checks of the school grounds, the Building Engineer must also check the OLA for litter, hazards, vandalism, etc. If there are issues that can't be cleaned up, the Building Engineer or Principal must submit a School Dude request for the issue.

Other maintenance considerations:

- Vandalism. Consider the potential for vandalism in the Design phase. Make sure the OLA doesn't invite illicit activity when school is out. Is it visible to neighbours? Is it lit by outdoor school lights or street lights?
- Budget. Are there funds available for unexpected challenges that might arise?
- Professional development. Will the teachers be equipped to make good use of the OLA? Join the VSB's [Outdoor Learning Group](#) on MS Teams for tips and resources.
- Removal. If the area falls into disrepair or does not meet VSB standards it will be removed. The school will be held responsible for the cost of returning the school ground to its previous state. Consider who may be interested in the supplies and resources you have. Contact [sustainability@vsb.bc.ca](mailto:sustainability@vsb.bc.ca) for assistance.

### III. Submit the proposal

Submit the proposal in writing to the Grounds Supervisor for review. Proposals are considered year-round. The Grounds Department will contact you to arrange a site visit meeting to review the proposal.

Once the proposal has been approved, your OLA Team will be asked to sign a School Outdoor Learning Area Agreement ([Appendix E](#)).

### IV. Installation



*Installation might occur over a few weeks depending on the scope of the project.*

Once the project is approved, the funds are secured, and the agreements are signed, the outdoor learning area is ready for installation.

1. Prepare the site. This can be completed by the Grounds Department, or by staff, students, and parents/guardians (upon approval from Grounds Department). Pull up turf, place down approved landscape fabric, put down limestone pad, lay-out plot boundaries, etc. Specifics will vary by site.
2. Install the permanent infrastructure and any other approved structures. The Grounds Department will coordinate delivery and installation with the suppliers.
3. Be sure to work with the Grounds Department to ensure that construction and installation follows all VSB union codes and building standards.
4. The Grounds Supervisor will complete a final inspection of the infrastructure.

## V. Celebration!

Congratulations, it's time to celebrate! Consider hosting an opening celebration, ceremony, or ribbon cutting for the school and neighbouring community to see the final project.



*The results will be worth the wait!*



*Integrating Indigenous knowledge and traditions adds meaning to the celebration and ongoing use of the OLA.*

## Appendix A – Frequently Asked Questions

How do we arrange a site visit regarding our plans?

- Once you have submitted a completed proposal to the Grounds Department you will be contacted to schedule a site visit.

What should we prepare for our site visit?

- A detailed outline of the project, including pictures, sketches and/or models; proposed locations and all the pertinent information gathered during the review of this guide. Choose a time when several of the school's Outdoor Learning Area Team members can attend.

Can VSB staff do the work for us?

- Yes. After approval has been granted for your site, the Grounds Department will put together a quote outlining the work to be completed. This will be sent to the Principal in the form of a repayable. Once this document is signed for acceptance and guarantee, we will then arrange a date to complete the work.

Does VSB staff have to do the work for us?

- It depends on type and scope of work requested. The Grounds Department will inform you what work must be done by VSB staff and what work can be done by the school, including parent/guardian volunteers.

Will the VSB pay for any of the costs of our project?

- No.

How much does it cost?

- This depends on the scope of work requested. The stone benches and concrete picnic tables are sold individually, so a bigger outdoor learning area will be more expensive. See [Appendix B](#) for cost estimates.

Why are the benches and picnic tables required to be surrounded by crushed limestone?

- Primarily for accessibility purposes, so that all members of the school community, regardless of ability or the presence of a mobility aid can access the outdoor learning area. There are other benefits to having the crushed limestone – it clearly delineates the outdoor learning area, reduces maintenance required, and improves access for everyone in poor weather (water drains away quickly, preventing muddy shoes).

How quickly can we have the work completed if VSB staff does the work?

- Depending on workload, staffing, and weather conditions, installation can take place between 3 and 6 months following receipt of the proposal.

May we expand our outdoor learning area into other areas of the school ground?

- Projects should not displace other important and appropriate functional uses of the school property. This includes opportunities for recreation and education (playing fields), identified locations for portables, and ancillary uses (parking, fire access, etc.).

What happens if the outdoor learning area is not successful?

- If the school decides they no longer want the outdoor learning area, or wish to move it to another location, contact the Grounds Department. **The outdoor learning area can be moved or removed by VSB staff at the cost of the school.**

Are we permitted to install water features like ponds or fountains?

- No. Water features are not allowed over concern for the health and safety of students and school grounds. There are the risks of mosquito-spread diseases and injury or death related to drowning. Additionally, these features are susceptible to acts of vandalism that can cause extensive damage to other areas of a school.

What equipment do you suggest to get started with outdoor learning?

- Consider the activities that will take place in your outdoor learning area, and how many students might be there at one time. Check local thrift shops or seek donations of second-hand items from throughout your school community for an affordable way to accumulate these supplies. The items on the following list are only suggestions:
  - Outdoor clothing (rubber boots, ponchos, hats, etc. – if they will help encourage your students to spend more time outdoors) - 1 per student
  - Waterproof “sit-upons” – 1 per student
  - Basic outdoor learning kit (clipboard, journal, pencils, etc. in a ziplock bag) – 1 per student
  - Observation tools (magnifying glasses, measuring tape, guidebooks, etc.)
  - Portable teaching materials that can be moved between indoors and out (i.e. easel/chalkboard/whiteboard, prepared learning kits in waterproof bins, etc.)

Can the VSB provide fencing for our project area?

- VSB installs chain link materials only. The cost is dependent on the size, scope, distance, and equipment and labour requirements.

Can we use logs in our outdoor learning area?

- No. Logs decompose and roll, creating a health and safety concern on the school ground. Only fencing or boulders can be used if approved by the Grounds Dept.

Can we plant fruit trees and/or berry bushes?

- No. Fruit trees are labour intensive, requiring experience in pruning and tree care. Fruit trees also attract unwanted rodents, insects, and other animals.

Can we plant trees for shade?

- Possibly. Trees must be discussed with the Grounds Department.

Are arbors, trellises, wooden fencing, pergolas, or gazebos allowed?

- No permanent structures are permitted. The safety and building standards required for school sites make it cost prohibitive to install arbors, trellises, pergolas, gazebos, logs, sheds, cob huts, rain barrels, fencing other than chain link, and loose rocks. Covered structures can attract people seeking overnight shelter and are susceptible to vandalism.

May we incorporate dry riverbeds into our plans?

- Riverbeds may only be allowed if there are no loose rocks. All materials must be concreted in place for safety reasons. The cost is dependent on the size, scope, distance, and equipment and labour requirements. This will require coordination with the Maintenance/Trades Department.

Once we have completed our project, may we expand or add to this established area?

- A written proposal for any additions or modifications must be submitted to the Grounds Supervisor for approval.

I still have unanswered questions, who can I call?

- VSB Grounds Supervisor Geoff Pearmain: 604-713-5661 and [gpearmain@vsb.bc.ca](mailto:gpearmain@vsb.bc.ca)

## Appendix B – Outdoor Learning Area Infrastructure Pricing

Component	Cost Estimate (subject to change)
Polished granite river rock bench (4-5 feet long)	\$630 each
Podium granite river rock (31 inches tall)	\$775 each
Polished concrete picnic table (can be universally accessible)	\$1900 each
Delivery charge/freight	\$200 to \$500 per supplier
Crane truck for infrastructure placement	\$150 per hour (most placements take less than one hour)

### Crushed Limestone Padding:

If the outdoor learning area infrastructure will be on an unpaved area, they must be on crushed limestone padding. This ensures that the outdoor learning area is universally accessible by people with mobility aids and allows for year-round use while avoiding mud and damage to surrounding turf. This will be installed by VSB staff and the cost will depend on the coverage required. You can contact the Grounds Department for an estimate.

Please note: All prices are estimates only and are subject to change based on the cost of materials and labour.

## Appendix C – Outdoor Learning Area Agreement

School:

Administrator:

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Outdoor Learning Area Team Lead(s):

Outdoor Learning Area Team Lead contact email:

Outdoor Learning Area Team Lead contact phone:

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Please initial each item below and sign the bottom

----- We commit to following our submitted outdoor learning area design plans and we will submit another application to Grounds if we wish to expand our outdoor learning area.

----- We will adhere to VSB standards including avoiding the use of pesticides, fungicides and herbicides on VSB properties.

----- We will respond in a timely manner to correct any safety issues created by the outdoor learning area or any violations to VSB codes.

----- If we wish to decommission or move the outdoor learning area, we will pay the VSB Grounds Department to do so.

*By signing below, it is agreed that the school will abide by, and is held responsible for, all outdoor learning area-related requirements as stated in this guide and any communication from VSB Grounds Department.*

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Administrator Signature

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Outdoor Learning Area Team Lead Signature

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Grounds Supervisor Signature

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Date

## Appendix D – Outdoor Learning Area Resources for Educators

Using an outdoor learning area is different from teaching in an indoor classroom. Participating in outdoor activities may require alternative group management strategies from those applied in indoor settings. Students who have had little previous experience in outdoor settings may require reinforcement of appropriate rules of behaviour. Outdoor learning areas may be better used as sites for direct experience rather than sites for direct instruction.

The following list of resources is good starting point for seeking out support and materials that can be useful in OLAs:

- [Canadian Wildlife Federation](#) - Colouring pages, educational units, lesson plans, manuals, handouts, resource sheets, wild webinars and more.
- [Child and Nature Alliance of Canada](#) – Canadian research and resources for advancing outdoor and nature-based learning.
- [Children and Nature Network](#) - Research library with a collection of scientific literature for advancing the children and nature movement.
- [Classrooms to Communities](#) – C2C works to grow teacher leadership and mentorship capacity for place-based education through local strategies, events, and activities.
- [Environmental Educators Provincial Specialist Association](#) (EEPSA) – A dynamic volunteer organization promoting networking, curriculum support, and leadership in environmental education.
- [Evergreen](#) - A searchable database of lesson plans, how-to guides and research on topics such as climate, conservation and outdoor learning & play.
- [Green Teacher](#) - Great kid-tested ideas for fostering learning and inspiring action on environmental and other global issues.
- [Habitat Conservation Trust Foundation Education](#) (aka WildBC) – Environmental and educational resources, links, and materials that can be downloaded, viewed and/or purchased.
- [Nature Kids BC](#) - The source for NatureWILD, a nature magazine featuring articles by BC’s leading naturalists, as well as games, nature activities, and more.
- [North American Association of Environmental Educators](#) - A resource hub for environmental education that includes lesson plans, activities, articles and other media.
- [Resources for Rethinking](#) - Lesson plans, curriculum units and other teaching resources that support interdisciplinary and action-oriented learning.
- [Science World](#) – A collection of resources that are teacher-reviewed, tested, and matched to BC’s new curriculum by grade.
- VSB’s [Outdoor Learning Group](#) on MS Teams – A hub for tools, resources, and like-minded colleagues to support and advance your outdoor learning efforts in the VSB.



WE WILL  
GET THERE,  
**TOGETHER.**

LET'S BE THE  
**GREENEST**  
SCHOOL  
DISTRICT.

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