



Why Work with a Designer?

Benefits of a Nature Explore Design

Many clients have the question, “Why should I pay a designer when I could just do it myself?” A very reasonable question. Those who choose to invest in a comprehensive Nature Explore design benefit from our years of experience designing outdoor environments and continued support beyond the implementation of the plan.

- The Nature Explore Design Consultation Process results in outdoor environments that promote whole-child learning, child-initiated exploration and adult-supported discovery that goes well beyond “recess” or going outside to “burn-off energy”.
- A professional design consultation helps build consensus amongst stakeholders, while incorporating each school’s values and collaborating on a shared vision for their space.
- A good design helps avoid practical construction and implementation challenges that can be avoided by good planning with an experienced design team—avoiding inefficiencies and wasteful spending.
- Clients benefit from our years of experience and lessons learned. Our design team is skilled at efficiently weighing the pros and cons of different area locations, material choices and furnishings, and equipment recommendations.
- Our design philosophy is rooted in research-based, field-tested design principles, so you can be confident your funds are going towards a successful design that works for children AND the educators that support them.
- As a non-profit our mission is to help nature become an integral, joyful part of children’s daily learning. We do that through our design clients and the success of your space is important to our mission. All our design clients receive on-going support throughout the life of their outdoor classroom. We are here to advise on questions that arise including questions around implementing your plan, maintenance questions and safety concerns.



Site Selection Considerations

Site selection can have a huge impact on your outdoor classroom budget and the complexity of implementation. In order to keep costs and timelines in check, there are certain characteristics and factors to consider when deciding which sites are good candidates for an affordable outdoor classroom implementation.

- **Size:** There is a direct relationship between the size of the site and the size of the budget required to develop it. Small sites (< 5,000 SF), Medium-sized sites (5,000-8,000), Large Sites (8,000-10,000 SF+)
- **Approval/Procurement Procedure:** Sites that require a formal public bid process, including a full set of construction documents, require much higher budgets than sites that can engage with a contractor of their choosing. A design/build landscape contractor can usually work straight off the scaled Nature Explore concept plan. If your site requires this level of detail, a local architect/landscape architect/civil engineer will need to be hired to draft and document the Nature Explore concept.
- **Site Prep/Site Access:** Some sites require additional work to prepare the space before the outdoor classroom components can be installed. This may include demolition of existing equipment, existing asphalt, concrete or poured-in-place safety surfacing. Sites with severe drainage issues may require civil engineering solutions. Sites that are difficult for a contractor to access will require a higher budget.
- **Slope/Accessibility:** A sloped site may require extensive earthwork and retaining walls, which will result in a higher cost. In some cases an engineer's site survey that includes topography will be required. Sloped sites that require a high degree of ADA accessibility will also require more funds. A site with a level or gentle slope is best suited for an outdoor classroom with limited funding.
- **Utilities, Easements, Setbacks and Permitting:** A site with extensive underground utilities, such as gas or sewer lines, easements or geothermal well fields will have more constraints. Protected wetlands or bodies of water may limit what type of construction is allowed within regulated setbacks. Some municipalities require building permits for specific structures/development. An agency's facilities and maintenance department may have information about these types of site constraints.
- **Existing Vegetation:** Previously undeveloped sites may be overgrown with vegetation that will need to be removed. Some noxious invasive plants, like Japanese Knotweed, may require special disposal at an increased cost.
- **Fencing and Irrigation/Water Access:** Some sites may require fencing to meet licensing requirements. A water line may need to be installed for sites without access to water. An irrigation system may be desired in certain climates.



Next Steps After Receiving Your Concept Design Package

- **Determine who will build your space:**
We highly recommend working with a landscape contractor for the bulk of the work. To reduce construction cost, volunteers may be used as needed for low-skill work. Identify a “project manager” to coordinate volunteer work.
- **Engage with a landscape contractor:**
Are there any companies you have worked with in the past that you had a good experience with? If not, look within your school community to see if there are any landscape contractors connected through the families in your program. If there are no landscaping companies directly connected to the school, look within your circle for recommendations.
- **Get a cost estimate:**
As part of your concept package you will receive a written scope of work to help communicate the design to a contractor. This accompanies the concept plan and material quantities estimate and goes into greater detail to explain the work in each area. Additionally, we will present the plan and scope of work to the contractor of your choosing, via zoom.
- **Do I need multiple estimates?:**
A landscape contractor that is connected to the school through students currently in the program, or that has been in the program in the past, often goes the extra mile to make sure your money goes as far as possible. If you don't have that connection and are getting bids from several contractors, the written scope of work will help clarify the design intent so you don't end up with wildly different estimates. While we will schedule only one “contractor presentation” in our scope of services, that meeting can be recorded and shared with additional contractors, or used for reference when explaining the work to multiple companies.
- **What if the cost estimate exceeds your budget?:**
While remaining “budget-conscious,” your concept plan will represent the comprehensive vision of the school and stakeholders and may exceed your current budget. Most outdoor classrooms are installed in phases or layered in over time. The Nature Explore Team is available to work with the school and the selected contractor on what to prioritize in order to work within the available budget without compromising the overall function of the outdoor classroom. We can also advise on what projects can be completed using volunteers.



How Much Will It Cost?

Determining a budget and a cost estimate is one of the most important steps of project planning. While costs vary depending on region and project scale, there are several variables that can help you better understand the anticipated costs of building a Nature Explore Classroom. The following information is based on our years of experience working on various projects and a range of budgets.

MAJOR VARIABLES

- Square footage of constructed space
- Earthwork and grading required to prepare the site
- Who will be doing the labor (volunteers, a design build landscape contractor, in-house maintenance/facilities staff.
- Desired/required level of ADA accessibility
- Correcting of drainage issues or other civil engineering solutions
- Requiring formal construction documents as part of a public bidding process
- Constricted or limited access for machinery

ADDITIONAL FACTORS

- Amount of demolition required to prepare the site (existing equipment, asphalt, etc.)
- New or relocated fencing
- Retaining walls
- The amount of hard surface area and desired material choice (stone, concrete, wood decking, etc.)
- Size, spacing and maturity of plant material
- Quantities of furnishings and loose parts
- The amount of time to complete the implementation (layered on or phased in over several seasons or all at one time)
- Irrigation needs

To get you started with fundraising goals and budgets, we've broken out three categories of pricing. Regardless of your resources, our design team will work with you on a plan that is both achievable and comprehensive. During the design consultation we will talk about your strategy for implementing the design, and will be available for guidance throughout your construction process as part of our on-going support. **See next page for pricing categories. . .**

STARTER BUDGETS: LESS THAN \$60K

- Built largely by volunteers, limited work by contractor
- Primarily “loose fill” surfacing (mulch and crushed stone)
- Working with existing topography and slopes
- Adding less mature trees and smaller plant material
- Creative reuse/repurposing of existing or donated furnishings and loose parts
- Constructed space of less than 5,000 SF
- Limited site prep (demolition of existing structures, concrete/asphalt surfacing)
- May cover a first simple implementation layer in a phasing plan
- Components and details that are simple to construct
- Easy site access for construction
- Smaller budgets (under \$30K) are also achievable with volunteer labor, creative repurposing, and a phasing in plan.

MID-RANGE BUDGETS: \$60K - \$100K

- Built by combination of volunteers and design/build landscape contractor
- New or reconfigured fencing
- Limited re-grading or cut and fill earthwork
- Constructed space of 5,000-8,000 SF
- Upgraded surfacing, including flagstone and decorative concrete.
- Small wood decks
- Adding larger more mature trees and plants
- Components and details with limited construction complexity
- Easy to moderate site access for construction
- Irrigation system

LARGER BUDGETS: \$100K-\$150K AND UP

- Working with architecture, landscape architecture or civil engineering firms to create biddable construction documents from the Nature Explore concept plan (often required for publicly bid projects)
- Built primarily by design/build landscape contractor or contractor selected through public bid
- High-end furnishings
- Adding mature trees and dense plantings
- Highest degree of ADA accessibility
- Extensive re-grading and/or retaining walls
- Constructed space greater than 10,000
- Large or custom climbing structures
- In-ground water features
- More intricate/complex design
- Moderate to difficult site access for construction