Tips for Advocating for
Unstructured Outdoor Play in Public Schools

You’re a parent, family member, caregiver, or another adult invested in outdoor play for all children, and you know that the public schools are an important place to expand this access. But how can you start the conversation in a productive and effective way? Here are some tips to help you feel more prepared to advocate for unstructured outdoor play for all children.

Figure out what you want to propose:

- Based on the research around unstructured / outdoor time, what do you think is currently missing from the school?
- What do you feel comfortable taking on in terms of advocacy / coordination / volunteerism?
- Some options / examples:
  - If your school has plenty of daily recess time, perhaps you want to advocate for more green space or a “loose parts” kit or program to supplement outdoor play time.
  - If your school does not have the recommended recess time, you might begin with a recess petition to address that need.
  - If you have the time and volunteer power, you could advocate for a part-day Forest Day (60-90 minutes, one day per week).
  - Depending on level of commitment and anticipated school / teacher support (or if you’ve already had success with one of the above options), you could develop a proposal for a full-day Forest Day each week.

Figure out what your school community needs and find allies:

- Listen! What does your school need? What do parents need? What would help teachers and administrators rather than add more to their workload?
- Try to identify needs that this program will meet. Figure out where your needs and the school community’s needs intersect.
- Some place you might find allies:
  - Teachers who want help managing a class with many behavioral needs—outdoor time helps with this.
  - Parents who are on board with the importance of unstructured outdoor play.
• Parents of children with behavioral needs—time outside helps!
• Administrators who are interested in additional funding—maybe there is grant funding available for this type of program.
• Teachers who are on board with the importance of unstructured outdoor play.
• Teachers whose standards can be met by your proposal—familiarize yourself with the standards used by your school!

Meet with your principal:
Keep in mind that while most schools will likely be supportive of these types of initiatives, teachers and administrators are incredibly busy and have many demands on their time. Be ready with printed resources to explain the benefits of free play outdoors. Come prepared with a list of allies/volunteers and a proposal that clearly answers the following questions:

● What is the need(s) you are going to meet?
● What class(es) are you targeting?
● How long will the children be outdoors? Will they be on campus or off?
● What will the children do?
● What will the children learn? (reference standards if possible)
● Where will you take them?
● Who will be with the children? (volunteers, teachers)
● If leaving school grounds, what will be the procedure if someone gets hurt?
● What about the weather?
● For what period of time will this program run, and how will success be gauged/tracked?

Once you’ve gone through all these steps, you’ll be on your way to advocating for getting all kids at your school outside and enjoying more unstructured, free play. Please try to be flexible and keep an open mind throughout this process! Perhaps you go in asking for a full day of outdoor time, but the principal comes back saying they are open to trying 60 minutes at first. Be open to meeting the school halfway in order to get a program up and running. Thank you for taking this on and making a difference for children in your local community!

For more information and resources, visit www.freeforestschool.org/public-school-outreach