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Littleton Public Schools

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Outdoor Classroom Creates New Learning Opportunities at Russell Street School



From left: Fourth graders Maddy Welz, Daniella Rawa, Theresa Wright, Maddie Reinherz, Kylie Dunn, Laasya Barla, and Kierob Cherubino participate in an activity in the Russell Street School's outdoor classroom. (Courtesy Photo)

LITTLETON -- A few years ago, teachers at the Russell Street School began implementing the new Responsive Classroom approach that aims to make their classrooms more engaging and inclusive.

While a Responsive Classroom's success does rely heavily on the daily morning meetings between teachers and students, it's much less dependent on the four walls that surround a typical classroom.

As the morning tradition took hold, students often expressed a desire to hold the meetings -- marked by a greeting, a chance to share in discussion and participate in a group activity -- outdoors.

That desire ultimately served as the foundation for an outdoor classroom that has now become a reality at the school thanks to the efforts of teachers Jessica Schoffel and Heather Love.

"From doing those meetings outside a few times," Schoffel said, "It gave us the idea that it would be cool to have a dedicated learning space outside."

The classroom began taking shape last August, when landscaping was completed and a circle of paving stones was laid behind the school near the playground. During the spring, the project was completed with the installation of a giant outdoor chalkboard and 30 wooden seats to round out the circle.

Now that it's complete, the outdoor classroom opens up a new avenue for students to engage and learn in different ways, including through activities that can only take place outdoors.

"It really lends itself to so many opportunities," Love said. "Not only can it be valuable for science or outdoor-focused lessons, but you can bring any kind of learning outdoors and just make it more engaging."

While all of Littleton's schools are moving increasingly toward technology-inclusive lessons indoors, Schoffel sees the outdoor classroom as a one-of-a-kind resource for teachers whose students are spending a growing amount of their time in front of screens.

"It's been nice to have something that takes them to a totally different place," Schoffel said. "It's a new kind of learning, but it's not tech based."

According to Love, the project has energized students and teachers alike, and is the result of a community-wide effort.

"To see it finished to completion and have it be such a special place, and have the kids really enjoying it, has been so inspirational to me as an educator," Love said.

Now that the project is complete, the teachers will turn their attention to seeking out professional development opportunities for themselves and their colleagues in order to help them get the most out of the space.

"It brings me great pride to be a part of a school community where faculty members take this type of initiative on behalf of students," Principal Scott Bazydlo said. "The outdoor classroom is a special space that will benefit the Russell Street School community for years to come. The outdoor classroom far exceeds any of our expectations and it's a result of a lot of teamwork and vision from Ms. Love and Ms.

Schoffel."

The outdoor classroom project would not have been possible without the support of numerous members of the Littleton community, including the Littleton Education Foundation, Russell Street School PTA, Dan Sturtz and Littleton Earthworks, Adam Ames and Barton Properties, Luis Guttierres and New England tree Masters and Bill and Peter Sturtz and Start to Finish Construction.

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The outdoor classroom was completed during the last year through the support of multiple community members. (Courtesy Photo)

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