

Nature and School Wellness Symposium

Nature, Health, and the Future of Learning

PROGRAM AND SCHEDULE

Date: Friday, June 12, 2026 (8:30-3:30)

Location: MDC Powder Valley Conservation Nature Center

8:30 Check-in and Networking

9:00 Welcome and Opening Remarks

9:25 **Featured Presentation**

The Nature Advantage: Strengthening Student Outcomes and Well-Being in Schools

How can schools improve student outcomes and student well-being at the same time? Emerging research points to a powerful, often underutilized solution: nature. Drawing on her lifelong career in education and current experience at the Missouri Department of Conservation, Dr. Margie Vandeven, MDC Education Branch Chief, will highlight the growing body of research linking nature-based experiences to stronger academic outcomes, improved attention and executive functioning, reduced stress, and increased student engagement.

10:00 First Concurrent Session

11:00 Second Concurrent session

12:00 Boxed lunch

- Guided nature walks
- Networking

1:00 Third Concurrent Session

2:00 **Featured Presentation**

Prescribing Nature: A Pediatrician's Perspective on Student Health

Dr. Maya Moody, pediatrician, highlights the medical evidence linking time in nature with improved physical, mental, and emotional health, underscoring why access to nature is essential for the well-being of young people.

2:30 **Featured Presentation**

Breaking Down Barriers: Outdoor Learning for Academic and Social-Emotional Growth

Dr. Sharonica Hardin-Bartley, Superintendent of the School District of University City, will share lessons learned – successes and challenges alike – on expanding access to outdoor and environmental education, and how connecting students with nature has supported both academic achievement and social-emotional wellness.

3:00 **Panel Discussion**

3:20 **Closing remarks**

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Concurrent Session Topics

Concurrent sessions will be selected by completing a survey sent after registration. Participants will select three sessions to attend.

Connecting Outdoor Schoolyard Phenomena with Curriculum Goals

Explore how nature-based observations and activities can support existing academic standards and learning objectives.

Susan German, Coordinator of Curriculum, Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

When We Let Nature Teach: Turning School Grounds, Into Learning Grounds

This session explores how intentional design of school grounds can shift maintained outdoor space into functional learning environments without expanding property or creating unsustainable maintenance demands. Using examples from Mehlville School District, the presentation outlines a replicable framework that aligns educational opportunity with operational realities.

Gerry Spitznagle, Head Groundskeeper, Mehlville School District; Phoebe Ellis, Private Lands Conservationist, MDC

Nature-Based Learning Beyond Science

Explore how nature can become a meaningful part of learning across the school day — not just in science. This session will share engaging ideas for integrating nature into ELA, social studies, art, and PE, drawing from examples across elementary, middle, and high school classrooms. Walk away with inspiring ideas that support student engagement, curiosity, and connection to the natural world.

Sharon Charlebois, Integrated Studies Teacher, Principia Middle School; Hope Gribble, Garden Education Coordinator, Principia School; John Kavanaugh, English Teacher, Principia Upper School

The Value of Outdoor Time for Students with Special Needs

This session explores how intentional outdoor learning can support focus, regulation, and engagement for students with special needs. We will examine common barriers to access — from physical and sensory challenges to scheduling and staffing constraints — and share practical strategies for creating inclusive, predictable, and safe outdoor experiences. Educators will leave with concrete ideas for adapting environments, materials, and routines so that every student can benefit from the cognitive, social, and emotional advantages of time spent outside.

Dr. Michael Maclin, Superintendent, Special School District of St. Louis County

The Power of Nature Mindfulness Practice for Schools

A hands-on exploration of intentional outdoor experiences, their benefits for well-being, and practical methods for implementation in school settings. Learn practical approaches that help students become calmer, more focused, and better able to manage emotions in and beyond the classroom.

Jess Thenhaus, ANFT Certified Forest & Nature Therapy Guide, NBHWC National Board Certified Health & Wellness Coach, Urban Forest Therapy

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MDC Discover Nature Schools Overview and Experience

This session introduces the Discover Nature Schools (DNS) curriculum's architecture, its alignment with nature-wellness initiatives, and the supports to classroom adoption. To demonstrate the DNS "active-learning" philosophy, we will facilitate two brief, high-impact activities that showcase the student experience. Perfect for leaders looking to enhance their school's wellness profile through outdoor engagement.

Wendy Parrett, Nicholas Linke, MDC Curriculum Specialists

Nature, Health, and Learning: What the Research Now Tells Us

Over the past three decades, research on the benefits of nature for school children has grown from almost nonexistent to a rapidly expanding field. This session explores emerging meta-analyses on nature exposure, outdoor learning, and student well-being—highlighting evidence that links outdoor experiences to reduced stress, improved emotional regulation, and an increase in behaviors that support learning. Participants will reflect on their own experiences and identify actionable strategies, from outdoor reflection spaces to school gardens, that can support healthier, more effective learning environments.

Deborah Rogers Curtis, Green Schools Coordinator, Missouri Gateway Green Building Council

Nature, Schools, and Wellness: Facilitated Discussion

Engage with other school leaders in a collaborative conversation to identify opportunities, challenges, and practical strategies for strengthening student and educator wellness through nature-based approaches across school communities.

Moderated by MDC Education Staff