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COVID-19 transformed the world of outdoor education

Here's what local leaders say has changed

By Kate Bradshaw

A day at the Peninsula Forest and Beach School won't involve computers, Zoom or Wi-Fi. Instead, a recent school day there involved a group of young students wearing brightly colored masks at Twin Pines Park in Belmont, reading stories on a picnic blanket with their instructor, feeling tanbark with bare feet and going for a hike.

Perhaps that's why, since the start of the pandemic, the school has seen a tenfold increase in enrollment, from 15 families to 150. The demand has come largely from the school's expansion into providing customized learning programs for private family pods, according to Bonnie McKinney, owner and director of the Peninsula Forest and Beach School.

As data have increasingly found that COVID-19 spreads far less frequently outdoors than indoors — one study published in the *Journal of Infectious Diseases* found that it is nearly 19 times more likely to spread indoors than outdoors — the drive to find ways to educate children outdoors during the pandemic has led to new opportunities and obstacles for outdoor education providers.

And while adults throughout

the Peninsula are getting vaccinated against COVID-19 in growing numbers, children under 16 are not yet eligible for any vaccine and remain vulnerable to developing complications from COVID-19 that, though rare, can be life-threatening.

While private outdoor education providers like the Peninsula Forest and Beach School have seen skyrocketing demand, other providers have seen significant disruptions and have had to adapt quickly to deliver their programs in new ways.

Meanwhile, educational leaders whose work previously focused on environmental literacy efforts became the new expert consultants, working with school districts to safely bring classes outdoors.

Many questions remain about the future of outdoor education as the prevalence of COVID-19 declines.

We asked local leaders throughout the outdoor education industry to identify trends they've seen and share their insights about where things are headed.

The growth of private learning pods

McKinney, whose outdoor school program has grown tenfold during the pandemic, said



Daniela Beltran B.

Teacher Jean Sternke reads a book to the children from Peninsula Forest and Beach School at Twin Pines Park in Belmont on May 4.

that a big part of the success is due to its flexibility in developing pod-based programs.

"That was the new innovation that ended up happening," she said. "We have over 15 private cohorts that didn't exist before."

The school works mainly with children ages 3 to 10 and sees the most interest among 3- to

7-year-olds. Its traditional programs run through public parks in partnership with the cities of Belmont and Redwood City, as well as the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in Montara, to teach children outdoors.

Some families the school works with have been extremely cautious about COVID-19, only

ordering groceries for delivery, rarely leaving the house and avoiding grandparents, McKinney said. Perhaps a mother is pregnant, or a family member has health conditions that demand extra caution. She said she carefully interviewed

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Portola Valley School District parcel tax measure leading in early returns

By Angela Swartz

Measure S, a reduced parcel tax measure for the Portola Valley School District, is ahead in early results from Tuesday's special election.

By the close of election night on May 4, 75.3% of votes counted were in favor of the measure, which requires a two-thirds majority to pass, county election officials reported. Measure S

was the only item on San Mateo County's all-mail ballot.

The district is asking for less money than the current parcel tax, which is set to expire: \$471 per parcel annually versus the current rate of \$581. It would raise \$997,000 annually for the K-8 district. It has an eight-year term and would expire in 2029.

"Although we are happy to learn of the early result and the strong support from our community, it is important that

the Elections Office takes the time to count every vote," said Superintendent Roberta Zarea in a Wednesday email. "We are cautiously optimistic based on these initial results. A lot of work went into listening early on to our community so we could put a measure on the ballot that our community could get behind. Thank you to everyone who came out and supported our local PVSD schools and children."

Semi-official election results at 8:10 p.m. on election night show Measure S with 1,743 votes in support and 573 no votes (24.7%). Just two of these votes were turned in at voter centers; the rest were mailed to the Elections Office.

District officials are asking taxpayers for less because the district has made \$1.3 million in cuts over the last three years, said district Chief Business Officer Connie Ngo. The district

saved money by eliminating an assistant principal position at Corte Madera School; eliminating a district office classified staff position; freezing the hiring of the director of learning and innovation; eliminating 30 telephone lines; and reducing its workforce by seven teachers and classified staff positions through attrition, Ngo said.

Voters in March 2020 failed

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interested families and pods to match them with outdoor educators committed to complying with the family's concerns, even selecting educators based on their living conditions, such as having just one low-risk housemate. Staff members for private cohorts often work with only one group, and up to three cohorts if they all agree. These staffers don't mix with the other program instructors, and there are precautions: taking temperatures, washing hands, avoiding shared foods and wearing masks.

Looking to the future, McKinney said she expects that many families will return to school, though some will still want to participate in her outdoor learning programs after school.

Other families have expressed a commitment to the private pod model next school year, she said.

"I think there's still an interest in people wanting to be safe for one more year, and limit the exposure their children have to people," she said.

And a couple of families have turned to the Peninsula Beach and Forest School to provide all of their students' schooling, she said.

Many of the families she's worked with have attended

traditional rather than home school. To transition to home school but also to having school fully outdoors has been a new concept for many parents, McKinney said.

The pandemic has exposed a whole new group of parents to the concept of "forest school" who might otherwise have thought it was a radical idea, she added.

"I'm hoping that this is an anchor in people's lives, that they have this moment in time to build a connection to nature that's not going away," she said. "I'm really hoping that this is the beginning of a beautiful nature connection and relationship for kids and families."

Investment in outdoor classrooms

For Andra Yeghoian of the San Mateo County Office of Education, the pandemic has created new interest from local school districts to expand facilities to provide outdoor learning spaces. And that interest has snowballed into a broader openness to environmental literacy programs.

Yeghoian is the office's environmental literacy and sustainability coordinator and has been leading an initiative to provide technical support to public and private schools in San Mateo

County, helping them figure out how to do more teaching outside during the pandemic.

Whether that meant taking math and English classes outside or developing specific curriculum related to the outdoors, roughly half of the school districts in the county reached out for technical assistance in the past year.

One of the biggest obstacles schools faced was in their physical outdoor layouts, she said. "A lot of schools needed to look at their infrastructure."

In some cases, schools already had plenty of picnic tables, benches or other outdoor seating, and it was a matter of moving or clustering them differently to facilitate outdoor learning. Others had to invest in seating, shade structures or outdoor Wi-Fi hubs.

"Many saw that as a long-term investment to use in the short term," Yeghoian said.

Her team provided training to staff and faculty members on how to feel comfortable teaching outdoors, thinking through which class activities work better outdoors, or how weather might impact those activities and how to plan for them.

Circle time lends itself to taking place outside, while math classes might need to be rethought. For early learners, she suggested, instead of using building blocks in a classroom to teach about shapes and numbers, how about using rocks or pieces of bark to teach the same lesson outside?

The vast majority of the technical support provided to districts was before the vaccine, and many teachers were saying that they wanted to teach outdoors because of the lower transmission rates, she explained.

"I think another outcome has been helping more teachers feel safe and comfortable returning to teach in person," she said.

The office also worked with private schools, some of which opted to have their students spend most of their school days outside.

"Regardless of COVID-19, having kids spend part of their time outdoors every day should be part of their regular education process," she said. "Learning and playing in the outdoors is a resiliency strategy that works no matter what the circumstances are."

Research indicates that being in an outdoor environment can also help reduce the amount of trauma that kids feel in the moment, and will likely provide a valuable tool for social-emotional learning as kids transition back into school, she said.

In the long term, Yeghoian added, it's likely there are going to be more disruptions to learning due to climate change, and



Daniela Beltran B.

Students at the Peninsula Forest and Beach School get ready for a hike at Twin Pines Park in Belmont on May 4.

figuring out how to use outdoor spaces to benefit students and reduce each school's environmental footprint will be helpful.

"You have to make the investment at some point," she said.

For nonprofits, virtual options expanded, but finances didn't

For other more traditional providers of outdoor and environmental learning, the pandemic has proven more disruptive.

The CuriOdyssey Science and Wildlife Center at Coyote Point in San Mateo has had to significantly retool its approach to stay alive.

According to Carl Oosterman, director of education at CuriOdyssey, the nonprofit closed to the public when the pandemic started, and it was thanks to federal Paycheck Protection Program loans that the organization was able to "come out of the pandemic and not have to shutter completely."

With the facility shut to visitors, leaders at CuriOdyssey quickly pivoted to offering virtual education programs. The shift to online lessons enabled staff to provide lessons more conveniently than it would have pre-pandemic, but it has resulted in a decline in revenues. Previously, fees from field trips had been a key revenue stream for the organization, Oosterman said, adding that it's not likely that field trips are going to come back soon, since traveling by school bus is still a risk that makes many educators and parents wary.

They're also anticipating that some local schools may be facing budget cuts and may not have funds for field trips next year, he said.

Not being able to hold summer camps last year also hurt. By the fall, CuriOdyssey was able to set up an outdoor learning space, offering an early learning program for parents and young children, an after school program and a program for home-schooled students, he said.

Before the pandemic, most of those programs would have

taken place in an indoor classroom, Oosterman said, but the kids seemed to enjoy playing with the tactile surroundings of leaves, rocks and sticks, while enjoying the distractions — which became learning opportunities — when wildlife would run, slither or fly through the outdoor "classroom."

"A lot of natural learning opportunities ... occurred by having our programs done outside," he said.

As for what's next, the organization is looking to continue with its virtual programming offerings and go back to providing in-person opportunities safely — while focusing on tackling the learning gap that has emerged between students who have had the technological tools to engage with online learning and those who have not.

One added perk of virtual programs is that CuriOdyssey was able to include participants from far beyond the region, with people attending events from New York, Los Angeles, Washington and Sacramento, he said.

"We were popular when the pandemic hit. If we have any headwind, it is people's fear or apprehension of going back to an institution where people are touching exhibits and it may be crowded," he said.

The pandemic has laid bare the gap between those who have the resources to bring their kids to an after school program, sign them up for a virtual class and have the Wi-Fi and technological equipment to connect, and those who don't, he said.

"What we are going to be focused on as part of that building process is (that) we want to make sure that science is accessible to everyone ... We're keenly aware of that learning loss and that gap, and as an organization, we want to make sure that we're leading and providing opportunities for those marginalized communities," he said. ▀

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Philip Martin Humphreys

November 24, 1942 – April 14, 2021

Phil Humphreys passed peacefully in his sleep after a long battle with heart disease. Phil was born in Oregon, and upon graduating from Medford High, was recruited by all the west coast schools as well as some in the mid west, to play football. He was an incredible player, and was one of the fastest graduates in 1960. Luckily for his wife Sharon, he chose Stanford. They met and married in 1964, just after Sharon graduated from Woodside High. Phil had a wonderful career in the computer field, working at many companies in the bay area. They settled in Portola Valley in 1973, raising 2 wonderful daughters. Phil was very active in the community, serving on several committees. He retired in 2012 and he and Sharon traveled extensively. He is survived by his wife of 57 years, Sharon, daughters Robyn and husband Dan, Lisa and husband Steve, and 4 grandchildren, Phil, Alex, Stephanie and Grant.



A celebration of life will be held July 10th at 1pm in Portola Valley, site to be announced later.

Memorial donations may be made to Stanford Football.

PAID OBITUARY