Welcome back to what we hope will be the new normal of convening early childhood and early elementary teachers to learn about and engage in nature-based education. We’re planning conferences that can accommodate 100–125 folks and we’re hoping to be mask-less. Time will tell. We’re continuing to expand our focus, so we now are planning workshops to address teachers of pre-K through grade 4 students in our two New England events. We’re also planning on workshops that continue to address what we’ve learned about outdoor learning during the pandemic.

Antioch University New England will again host three In Bloom conferences this spring in the eastern United States.

We’ll be offering our first conference in the mid-Atlantic states at In Bloom in Delaware on the campus of the University of Delaware and in conjunction with the University of Delaware Lab School and the Human Development and Family Sciences Department. The Delaware conference will be on Saturday, April 2, 2022 and will focus on early childhood education for toddlers through children age six. Come south for an early spring experience.

Next is In Bloom in Western Massachusetts on Saturday, May 14, 2022 hosted at the beautiful Hitchcock Center for the Environment in Amherst, Massachusetts. We’ll focus on pre-K through grade 4 students and teachers here.

Our last event will be In Bloom in Maine in mid-coast Maine on Saturday, June 11, 2022 at the Blueberry Cove 4-H Camp and Learning Center in Tenant’s Harbor—a beautiful new location for us. Right on the water, so bring your bathing suit.

For you mid-westerners, let us draw your attention to a new conference: The Midwest Early Childhood Educator Symposium: Honoring the Earth and Each Other Through Fostering Diversity Equity, Access and Inclusion on June 4, 2022. Antioch University will serve as co-sponsor to this event of the Northern Illinois Nature Preschool Association (NINPA) and the Morton Arboretum outside of Chicago.

In the early stages of the pandemic, it became clear that transmission of the virus in closed, indoor spaces was much more likely than outside in the open air. Indoor ventilation systems facilitated exposure to the virus, outdoor spaciousness facilitated dispersal of the virus, and allowed children to socially distance. For the last two school years, many early childhood centers and elementary schools across the northeast have realized that one solution to keeping schools open year-round was to move classrooms outside as much as possible. This preserved equal access for all children, rather than just the children with technology and a good internet connection. Educating outside has been one part of the solution to the diversity, equity and inclusivity challenges of the pandemic.

We’ve got exciting new keynote speakers this year from around the country. Some new speakers will be Rose Brusaferro from Baltimore discussing the differences between nature-based early childhood programs in east and west Baltimore, Ayana Verdi, Director of the Verdi Ecoschool in Melbourne, Florida and Tara Williams, Executive Director of the Maine Association for the Education of Young Children. And we’ll spotlight the work of Antioch New England faculty members who teach in the Nature-based Early Childhood Certificate program.

We look forward to seeing you at one of this year’s spring In Blooms. Bring mud boots, raingear, your indomitable spirits and perhaps some backyard flowers.

Iris Ponte, director of the Henry Frost Children’s Program in Belmont, Massachusetts, said this about her learning during the 2020–2021 school year:

“As a preschool educator, I used to think 30 degrees was cold. Not anymore...We have learned to layer, eat warm foods in Thermoses, and keep moving. I was not trained to be an outdoor educator, but I have learned to embrace it. In fact, I do not think I will ever be able to work with children again without prioritizing the outdoors.

The children have adapted and adjusted in ways we could never have imagined. They cheer when we have ice rain, and they cannot wait to see how the snow transforms our play spaces.... Our curriculum has taken on a whole new dimension, as we push away the boundaries of our school walls and play yard fence, and explore beyond. We have learned that weather is to be embraced, the seasons to be understood, and for the first time in my life, I have been teaching young children completely outdoors for five hours a day.”
Morning Keynote

Cultivating Connection: Using the Community-as-Campus to Build Immersive Learning Experiences for Young Children

Ayana Verdi, Founder, Director, Verdi EcoSchool, Melbourne, FL

The Verdi EcoSchool is the first Urban Farm School in the southeastern United States and the only school of its kind in the state of Florida. Serving children from 3 – 15 years of age, EcoSchool students learn to view themselves as the single most powerful resource within their community. As part of the educational program, the classroom extends to unique settings: exploring the waters of the local Indian River Lagoon, learning about restorative agriculture on a community garden and creating replicas of ancient First Nations tools in ceramics classes at the Foosaner Art Museum and Education Center. Ayana, founder and director of the school, will lead you on an exciting exploration of a day in the life of a student at this place and project-based community school.

In 2016, Ayana Verdi established Verdi EcoSchool to provide hands-on educational experiences for children in the historic Eau Gallie Arts District in Melbourne, Fla. It is the first K-8 urban farm school in the southeastern United States. Ayana was awarded the prestigious Drexel Fund Fellowship in 2019 and has extended the successful K-8 program by founding a new high school model which incorporates hands-on, immersive learning through practical, real-world internships. Inspired by the nature-based school her son attended while she lived and studied in New Zealand, Ayana is committed to cultivating community-based and environmentally aware educational options for children.
Being outdoors relieves stress and anxiety, gives kids the freedom to move, and helps them focus. All of this leads to a more joyful, balanced, productive school day. But once you have your students outdoors, what are you going to do with them? This workshop looks at easy, engaging ways to bring the learning standards you teach indoors outside into nature. This year I challenged myself to have “Wednesday in the Woods,” a day when most of the instruction for my first-grade students takes place outdoors. I’ve had to find creative ways to structure outdoor lessons that connect to our curriculum. In searching for simple activities that would not need a lot of preparation, I’ve found scavenger hunts, gathering expeditions, and nature walks to be the most engaging. Come try them out for yourself in this workshop.

Being Animals

Katie Koerten, Educator, Hitchcock Center for the Environment, Amherst, MA

What better way to appreciate animals in early childhood than to “become” them? Katie offers a series called “Being Animals” to preschoolers through third graders that taps into the enormous capacity for empathy that young children possess. By pretending to be animals in the outdoors, young children develop appreciation and understanding of the local creatures that share our home. Workshop participants will experience animal movements, songs, stories, and unstructured play that Katie uses to craft the Being Animals series. Katie will also share the ways she makes connections to literacy and STEM through an animal lens. Come be a bear, an owl, a squirrel, and more.

The Earth Moves Under My Feet: Salamander Curriculum for the Early Grades

Renee Bachman, Third Grade Teacher, Leeds Elementary School, Northampton, MA

Did you know that the red-backed salamander population in a forest may weigh as much as all the small birds or small mammals in the same area? Come participate and learn about SPARNet, a Citizen Science Project, and look for Red-backed Salamanders in the Hitchcock Center forest. I will share with you how I have incorporated this study into my science curriculum as a long-term research project and share books, resources, and protocols so that you can do this study with your students. Be ready to get your hands a little dirty!

Afternoon Keynote

Re-Imagining Education and Co-Creating Change: How a professional learning community (PLC) for Maine administrators is implementing nature-based change in PreK-8 schools

Anne Stires, Affiliate Faculty, Antioch University, Keene, NH, Educational Consultant and Founder, Juniper Hill School, Alna, ME

Why outdoor, nature connected learning? Why now? What are the concerns? How do we implement outdoor learning in small steps? How do we make sure it continues long after the global pandemic? How do we get teachers the professional development and support they need? With the pandemic, many Maine schools have embraced a shift toward outdoor learning—but now, over two years later—administrators, teachers, school communities, and students need continued support.

Anne leads a professional learning community (PLC) for administrators who are leading their schools to be models of “nature- and outdoor-based teaching and learning.” A dozen superintendents, principals and district-wide outdoor learning coordinators from across the Wabanaki lands now known as Maine have been meeting for 18 months. Learn how this initiative is helping to make nature more central to the education of all Maine students.

Anne Stires, M.Ed. is the founder of Juniper Hill School for Place-based Education in Alna, Maine. She is now an independent educational consultant working with schools and programs throughout Maine and beyond to support equitable outdoor learning and nature connection initiatives. She is a regularly featured speaker at many nature-based education conferences and is the facilitator of Maine’s public school Nature-based Administrators’ Professional Learning Community. Anne teaches graduate level courses for Antioch University as affiliate faculty and serves as an advisor to the Inside–Outside: Nature-based Educators’ Network. She is the author of a chapter in Nature Preschools and Forest Kindergartens and was a member of the writing team for the Natural Start Professional Practices Guidebook.
Art in the Forest: Nature as Inspiration and Medium

Aemelia Thompson, Educator, Hitchcock Center for the Environment, Bernardston, MA

In my program, we “sow the seeds for well beings” through holistic education, land stewardship, farm-to-table foods, and an Afro-folk perspective on artful living and purposeful work. We nurture children of all backgrounds, ensuring that our school is a place where the cultural wholeness of children is seen and embraced. The workshop will discuss and demonstrate how outdoor, nature-based education for home programs can be a radical and transformative approach to early childhood, especially for People of Color whose needs are often not addressed through mainstream movements.

Where Does Water Go? An Exploration of Water through Story-driven Scientific Inquiry

Carol Berner, Director of the Water Inquiry Project, Smith College and Coordinator of the River of Words Project in Connecticut River Valley Schools, Northampton, MA

Eva Jaffe, First Grade Teacher, Springfield, MA., Public Schools

Experience for yourself the power of storytelling to spark children’s questions about water and to launch stimulating water investigations. Inspired by the interactive story of children rescuing ducklings from a storm drain, we will explore where water goes when it rains, and why it matters. Children’s questions and solutions drive this imaginative approach to scientific inquiry aligned with Next Generations Science Standards. Bring this engaging unit of study to your classroom, or let it inspire you to create your own story-based inquiry. Eva and Carol are eager to share their experiences with you and brainstorm ways to adapt these adventures to your school or community.

Daycare as a Radical Movement

Bessie Johnson, Director, Sow Well Tots Early Childhood Program, Bernardston, MA

In my program, we “sow the seeds for well beings” through holistic education, land stewardship, farm-to-table foods, and an Afro-folk perspective on artful living and purposeful work. We nurture children of all backgrounds, ensuring that our school is a place where the cultural wholeness of children is seen and embraced. The workshop will discuss and demonstrate how outdoor, nature-based education for home programs can be a radical and transformative approach to early childhood, especially for People of Color whose needs are often not addressed through mainstream movements.

Joy and Wonder through Nature Immersion

Ayana Verdi, Founder/Director, Verdi Ecoschool, Melbourne, FL

Nature Immersion early childhood programs incorporate hands-on experiential learning and authentic play to invite children to experience the joy and wonder of independent exploration and building meaningful relationships with the natural world. Treasure hunting or searching for natural loose parts holds many benefits for children: collecting and categorizing, identifying plants and animal species and safe foraging skills. Using all of their senses, participants will take a unique outdoors sensory journey to experience the natural environment through the eyes of a child and create an interactive sensory box to take home.

Give Your Curriculum Wings!

Birds Curriculum for Early Elementary Students

Renee Bachman, Third Grade Teacher, Leeds Elementary School, Northampton, MA

Robins, Blue Jays, Goldfinches, Pigeons! There are over 10,000 species of birds in the world and Massachusetts hosts more than 300 species each year! Come explore and look for birds in the Hitchcock Center’s forests and gardens! We will learn to focus our binoculars, experience the joy and wonder of independent exploration and building meaningful relationships with the natural world. Treasure hunting or searching for natural loose parts holds many benefits for children: collecting and categorizing, identifying plants and animal species and safe foraging skills. Using all of their senses, participants will take a unique outdoors sensory journey to experience the natural environment through the eyes of a child and create an interactive sensory box to take home.

Accessibility in a Forest Classroom

Kiah Tinkham, and Val Driscoll, Preschool Primers Teachers, The Center School, Greenfield, MA

When spending time in the woods with young children, it’s easy to see magic in the idea of being deeply removed and immersed in nature, but is this realistically accessible to all? Our preschool teachers are committed to creating and designing a forest space through an accessibility lens. They have intentionally transformed the edge of their woods, and so could you! Ask yourself, how do proximity, varied sensory needs, different ages, sizes, and abilities impact the spaces you design?

Together, we will practice creating small, incremental changes to the environment that inspire, scaffold, and provoke play. You will learn how to take inventory of what you have, and when it’s a good idea to skillfully introduce manufactured items. You will leave with strategies to transform the woods into an engaging play space that is both reachable and challenging for all!

Registration Fees

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If you have an unused voucher from a 2020 In Bloom conference contact Peg Smeltz, before registering!

Credit Card payment

Working Professionals – $125

AU Alumni & Current Students – $75

Group Rate $100/person

School Teams: 3 or more

REGISTER HERE

QUESTIONS? Contact Peg Smeltz at Antioch University New England, msmeltz@antioch.edu