

North Country School to take advantage of the great outdoors

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PHOTO PROVIDED The North Country School junior boarding and day school is embracing its legacy of hands-on education in the outdoors as it returns to operation during the COVID-19 pandemic, a press release said. The school will utilize locations around its 220-acre campus to provide the safe learning environment.



LAKE PLACID — As schools across the country are preparing to welcome back students against the backdrop of new COVID-19-related guidelines, North Country School is embracing its legacy of hands-on education in the outdoors.

Since its founding in 1938, the junior boarding and day school has used its unique Adirondack location to teach children from around the world in a collaborative community setting, a news release said.

The 220-acre campus yields countless opportunities for place-based learning—science labs take to the forest, children learn to garden and prepare food from the school's Edible Schoolyard, and poetry is composed on the Bog Bridge at the base of Pitchoff Mountain.

In the age of COVID-19, NCS administrators are finding they are well-placed to offer a safe, secluded environment for children to live and learn, the release said.

The campus boasts 2-plus acres per student, and there's no issue meeting the New York state guideline that requires a minimum of 15 square-feet per student — the school's small class sizes already provide 30-square-feet per student.

The pandemic did get NCS administrators thinking about how to change things up, though. The answer was nine covered, outdoor classrooms that will allow students to learn in a safe, airy environment.

"I feel like our classrooms were already outdoors, this is just committing us to learning outside each and every class, each and every day," Director of School Matt Smith said.

"This is bringing us back to our roots."

Some of the outdoor classrooms are repurposed facilities, like the butterfly house classroom, and four new spaces were created expressly for this purpose.

Depending on the classroom, six to 10 students can safely learn while socially distancing. Instead of standard desks and chairs, children will sit in academic Adirondack chairs, which were recently designed and built by NCS teacher Larry Robjent.

The wooden chairs each have a built-in surface that's the perfect shape and size for a notebook or computer. There aren't quite enough chairs for every classroom yet, so students will get to help make more in the school's workshop this fall.

As the air turns cold in the Adirondacks, students will inevitably have to say goodbye to attending class outside.

To keep the community safe, mask protocols and social distancing measures will be implemented, and every building on campus will be outfitted with new or upgraded air-handling systems, which will filter and exchange the air in each room, the release said.

Plexiglass barriers have also been installed at every table in the dining room so students can safely enjoy meals together.

Until inclement weather forces classes inside, Smith said the outdoor classrooms will offer a much-needed respite from some of the health and safety measures.

"We're trying to create a thriving, safe academic setting where kids can feel comfortable and normal," Smith said.

"By utilizing the outdoor classrooms, the students' focus will be on a robust academic experience rather than the impact that COVID-19 is having on everyone."