

Burford School (secondary school)

Large rural state secondary school using their grounds to support students struggling to access school.

Positive results have led to a school wide policy to use nature in education across all subjects, and for supporting wellbeing, behaviour, and human relationships within the school community.

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This practice-led case study is part of a research project looking at Nature-based programmes in secondary schools for mental health and wellbeing. Four case studies were produced in 2025 with secondary school teachers who use nature-based programmes.

Burford School is a large state mixed secondary school in a rural location at the edge of Burford in Oxfordshire. The school has large grounds with plenty of green space, mature trees and hedgerows, a small woodland, a copse, ponds, an orchard and allotment space. The school has built on experiences of the impact of green space on particular students over the last five years to build a school-wide and routine use of green space for education and wellbeing.

Experimentation leading to wide adoption

The origin of Burford's current approach to using nature as part of the school system was a year 6 child who was struggling to access primary school and extremely fearful of moving up to Burford School.

The Burford team discovered that the child enjoyed being outdoors. The school had a patch of land that had been unused following an ecology project, and in a carefully designed school transition process, the child was offered the opportunity to work with a willing Teaching Assistant (TA) to tend the patch during their first year. The child visited the school with their parents during the summer break to meet staff and discuss the project. When they joined the school in September they had an adjusted timetable with one session of 30mins to 1 hour per day working outside with the TA. They planned each session together, and over time the school observed that the child gained a sense of control, and a sense of belonging and was ultimately able to fully access school. This schedule went on for the majority of their first year, and was scaled back in their second year. It is mainly now used to help them regulate and have downtime at lunchtimes in a quieter environment.

The success of this initiative has led to the school using similar approaches with other students. Activities in school green spaces are now routinely used for children who need extra pastoral support at any point; proactive early interventions are deployed when the school perceives that it is needed to prevent costly and disruptive problems further down the line; and deeper interventions allow the school to keep students within the school community as far as possible when things go wrong.

The school is largely delivering this extra dimension to its provision within its existing budget and resources; being creative about how they use the school's financial, space and human resources. Given the high cost of using off site facilities for students who are struggling in mainstream school, there is a cost saving in being able to address issues on site. The school has also been able to get some additional funding for additional TA hours.

Nature supporting teaching across the curriculum

SLT now actively encourage and support all teachers to use the outdoor spaces for teaching and student wellbeing, happy for them to try things out without worrying if they don't work first time, confident in the wider value. Absence rates are well below the national average, bullying is rare, and rates of permanent exclusion are exceptionally low. The SLT feel that the way they use their green space contributes significantly to these figures.

As the school's leadership see the potential they keep developing the opportunities: an orienteering trail has been set up round the site, which is used for learning; the school is doing more with growing food and cooking: they have a school chef who is really keen on using local, seasonal food. They are planting more fruit trees, and aiming to get a polytunnel. They are keen to offer the new GCSE in Natural History, and interested in developing learning pathways into horticulture and other land based qualifications.

Community involvement and encouraging other schools

The school uses its staff and facilities creatively to be able to run these nature interventions. Through fundraising and donations in kind, support from local charities and community groups, they are crowdsourcing what they need, and involving the community in the project. The ideas are spreading as local feeder primaries see what can be done, and parents spread the message. Growing success is attracting attention which is bringing more funding and support.

Offering the site for use by local primary schools is under discussion, although the transport issues in a rural area are increasingly mitigating against school trips, however local. The school is keen to see the ideas being developed on their own site, spread to other schools, and they have been active in working with others to spread the learning on how to go about using nature to support school priorities.



Examples of how the school is using its green spaces for learning and wellbeing

- The pastoral team use the nature walks regularly with certain students.
- Students use the green spaces to support their own mental health.
- English teachers have done Macbeth readings under the trees outside the classroom.
- The school ran a creative writing house competition based on the green spaces.
- Drama teachers use the outside spaces creatively for drama activities.
- Biology lessons have included researching lichen distribution relative to proximity to the adjacent road.
- Physics lessons have involved studying forces outside with air pressure rockets or running wearing a parachute.
- A school Samba band makes use of spaces at the far end of the field to make a noise.
- Food tech classes are using food foraged or grown on site.
- Students are offered opportunities to do their Duke of Edinburgh volunteering in the school grounds.
- The school encourages “Reset” walks with teachers or teaching assistants under the trees for students who need to decompress.
- Where parents may feel pressured within the school environment, teachers can opt to conduct meetings walking in the wildlife area, helping to diffuse any tensions.
- A recent addition of vegetable growing beds outside the room used for students with additional needs has created an opportunity for students to go outside and do some gardening and decompress within sight of the staff.
- Tree stumps round a fire pit in the wood offer the opportunity of discussions around the fire, which brings a different quality to the interactions.
- An orienteering trail round the site is being used for teaching a whole range of subjects including science, languages, and arts. There is a periodic table on one of the posts.
- Parents are coming in to help with practical tasks, finding common ground with their children, and feeling positive about the school.

Methodology

Kim Polgreen has visited the school several times since July 2024, and had a number of in depth discussions with Stuart Bassett about the work using nature for wellbeing and education at Burford School. A semi-structured interview with Stuart Bassett was conducted as part of a wider project on nature education in December 2024. The study has been approved by Stuart Bassett on behalf of the school. This case study is a descriptive example based primarily on interviews and stakeholder discussions. It offers an illustrative, practice-led snapshot of school-based nature initiatives. This study received ethics approval from the Medical Sciences Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (MS IDREC 688330).

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<https://www.agile-initiative.ox.ac.uk/sprints/is-nature-a-policy-solution-to-mental-health-in-schools/>



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