

Wallingford School (secondary school)

Large urban state secondary school has turned a small courtyard into a growing garden and trained a teacher as a horticultural therapist.

Students who are struggling in the classroom have the opportunity to spend time helping in the garden.

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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 which use nature-based programmes.

Wallingford School is a large mixed state secondary school with a sixth form in a market town in Oxfordshire.

Horticulture activities in a courtyard garden

Having seen some positive impacts on the wellbeing of students who spent time in a courtyard garden with teacher Rebecca Ladbrook, the school has developed a forward thinking approach to nature connection and outdoor learning. Rebecca is passionate about the benefits of using gardens for learning and wellbeing, and the school has invested in training her as a Social and Therapeutic Horticulture practitioner.

The courtyard garden started life as a classroom sized outside atrium, only accessible from the building. Rebecca and the students have made this into a beautiful growing space with borders and containers being used to grow fruit, vegetables and annual flowers. There are also pet rabbits and a small flock of quail (small birds).

Opportunities for struggling students, and for everyone else

The space is widely used by staff and students to relax and rest, and selected students with SEND or behavioural challenges have some timetabled sessions with Rebecca in the garden. Students who are struggling with being in school due to EBSA (Emotional Based School Avoidance) and ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) are offered the opportunity to have some horticulture sessions.



The benefits of having the garden on site are that students who are struggling in the classroom can have a positive experience within school that can be built upon to encourage them back into the classroom (alongside other provisions like reduced timetables).

While the school has not yet put impact measurements in place, they notice that students say they prefer their sessions in the garden to being in lessons. Confidence in the approach is building within the school, and, as its value is being more widely recognised in the school community, the PTA has donated money to invest in the garden. The willingness of parents and the community to invest in such green education opportunities appears to be a common theme across the schools that have been studied. While not having a systematic analysis of the rationale for the willingness to give, the teachers involved reflect that there currently appears to be a growing recognition of the value of green spaces, and a desire to give this opportunity to the children, presumably reflecting the growing number of references to the benefits in the media.

Building on success

While tight timetables and a lack of time for experimentation make change challenging to implement in schools, this school is actively looking for further opportunities to engage their students with nature.

- The year 7s have been using the grounds and garden to look at ideas around cultivation, climate change, rewilding and nature connection in their Geography lessons.
- The school is considering offering the Natural History GCSE as an after school class for interested students, and the Level 2 qualification in Nature Connection and Wellbeing to SEND students and those on a non-traditional pathway with outcomes that are less academically focused.
- The school is exploring the opportunities presented by a biodiverse piece of land that they have been given, just a few minutes' walk away from the main school site. The gift was a legacy from a local person who wanted to see the benefits for local children. The site has a wildlife meadow, a species-rich hedge, a pond and some allotment beds. The school has received money from a local charity, which had funds for schools resulting from a major infrastructure project, to improve wildlife habitats on the site, and has invested in a potting shed and greenhouse. This additional space creates opportunities to bring ecology fieldwork closer to school, and to offer a wider range of students the benefits of learning outdoors.

Methodology

Kim Polgreen visited the school and the off-site space with Rebecca Ladbrook and conducted a semi-structured interview with her in December 2024. The study has been approved by the Head Teacher. 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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