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Six Questions to Ask Before You Buy Furniture for Outdoor Learning Spaces

A practical companion to The Case for Outdoor Learning

Outdoor learning works. The research behind that is laid out in Tenjam's white paper, *The Case for Outdoor Learning*, and so is the other half of the story: a space only delivers its benefits if it is still in good shape, and still being used, in year five. Climate is a design variable, and so is furniture.

Most outdoor learning spaces that fall out of use don't fail because of the idea. They fail because of what was bought for them. A school, library, museum, or hospital does everything right: finds the shade, plans the space, gets staff on board. Then two years in, the seating is stained, cracking, rusting, or blown across the parking lot, and the space quietly stops being used.

Before you buy, ask these six questions.

1. What happens to it after it rains, and does it have to come inside for winter?

A lot of outdoor seating, tree stumps and cut log rounds especially, looks natural and low-cost on day one. But wood in constant contact with the ground holds moisture and stays damp long after the rain stops. For younger kids that's an inconvenience. For middle and high schoolers, standing up with a wet or dirty mark on their pants is the kind of small, public embarrassment that makes them avoid the space, no matter how good the lesson plan is.

The same goes for furniture that technically *can* go outside but really needs to be brought in for winter, covered during storms, or stored in the off-season. It rarely makes the trip back out. Look for furniture designed to live outside permanently, one that tolerates an occasional power-wash and, when needed, a mold or mildew treatment, without the finish breaking down.

Soft seating deserves a closer look here. Some indoor furniture makers now offer true outdoor versions, with marine-grade plywood, stainless steel hardware, and mildew-resistant, quick-drying foam. Those are real upgrades. Even so, foam still absorbs some moisture and takes time to dry after a heavy rain, seams and gaps collect dirt, pollen, and debris, and fabric that reaches the ground catches splash-back. Many of these products still recommend covering them in rain, snow, or the off-season, which most facilities teams won't do consistently.

Ask: Does this dry quickly and stay outside year-round? If it's sold as outdoor-rated, which specific components were upgraded, and does it still need covers, drying time, or seasonal storage in practice?

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2. Was it built for your climate's hottest and coldest days?

The white paper makes the case that climate is a design problem, not a disqualifier, and the furniture is part of the design. In Phoenix or Orlando, the questions are heat and sun. Dark surfaces in direct sun get far hotter than surrounding materials (dark asphalt and rubber surfacing can run 40 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit hotter than grass or mulch), and that matters for a seat or tabletop a child will touch. Sun also fades color and breaks down plastics that aren't built for it. In Minnesota or anywhere with hard winters, the questions are cold and contact. Sitting still on a cold surface pulls heat from the body quickly, which is often a bigger factor in whether students want to stay outside than the air temperature itself.

Climate also decides which materials hold up. Some plastics turn brittle in deep cold. Some finishes fade or chalk after a few summers of intense sun. Metal conducts heat and cold fast, so it can be too hot to touch in July and too cold to sit on in January.

Ask: How does this surface feel at 100 degrees in direct sun, and at 15 degrees in the shade? What UV stabilization is it rated for, and does the warranty cover fading and cracking in my climate?

3. Is there anything underneath, or in the finish, that can rust, rot, or corrode?

Some low-cost options look durable on the surface but aren't underneath. Plastic-dipped steel tables are common in budget picnic sets, until the coating cracks or chips, which it eventually does, exposing bare steel. From there it's a matter of time before it rusts, which brings a safety concern (sharp, corroded edges), rust stains on the concrete below, and rust stains on kids' clothes.

Cold-climate institutions have an added wrinkle: sidewalk de-icing salt. Wood, fabric, and untreated steel all degrade faster with regular salt exposure, which speeds up the rot, staining, and corrosion described above. Polyethylene, by contrast, is largely unaffected by it.

Ask: What is this material doing five years from now, and does winter de-icing salt make that worse?

4. Does the mix of movable and permanent furniture make sense, and can the permanent pieces be anchored?

Lightweight furniture isn't a problem to solve. It's often exactly right. Stools, light seating, or cushions that students can carry outside for a lesson and bring back in afterward, or that a teacher can quickly reconfigure for group work, are useful, and light enough to store in a closet or shed. The white paper recommends this mix: lightweight, easily moved pieces for flexibility, alongside more permanent furniture meant to stay put.

For that second category, the tables and seating meant to live in a space long-term, anchoring matters. Furniture that is supposed to be permanent but isn't secured can end up rearranged by wind or dragged around campus. Anchoring also removes theft as a concern, even though outright theft of outdoor school furniture is rare. Wind and casual movement are the more common real-world issues.

Ask: Is this piece meant to move, or meant to stay? If it's meant to stay, can it be secured to the ground?

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5. Can everyone actually work on it?

Furniture that looks good in a rendering doesn't always work as a work surface. Expanded-mesh tabletops are a common lower-cost choice, but small components (pencil tips, coins, lab materials, STEM-kit pieces, anything smaller than the mesh gaps) fall straight through. For writing, sketching, or hands-on project work, a smooth, stable surface is the difference between furniture that supports learning and furniture that gets in its way.

Think about who is using the space, too. The research on children's hospital gardens, libraries, and museums comes back to the same point: a space works when it is designed for how its real users move and sit. That means a mix of seat heights, room for a wheelchair at a table, and clear paths between pieces.

Ask: Would you want to write, eat, or build something on this surface? Can a student who uses a wheelchair or mobility aid use it comfortably?

6. Who will maintain this, and what will it cost over ten years?

This is the question that decides whether a space lasts. Untreated wood picnic tables need regular sanding, painting, or staining to stay presentable. Exotic hardwoods like teak or ipe are often marketed as a premium, sustainable choice, but they typically need to be re-stained or re-sealed at least once a year, and a single table can take four or more hours to properly refinish. Multiply that by the four to ten tables a typical outdoor space might have, and "sustainable" furniture becomes one of the highest-labor items on a facilities team's calendar.

This is also where the cost argument in the white paper comes back in. A well-designed outdoor learning space typically costs a fraction of what the same amount of indoor square footage would. That advantage shrinks quickly if the furniture needs replacing or refinishing every few years. Price the furniture over a decade: purchase price, labor hours, replacement parts, and what happens when nobody has time to maintain it.

A space that starts to look neglected tells teachers and students that it isn't worth using. The furniture that gets used for years is the furniture nobody has to think about.

Ask: If nobody touches this for three years, what will it look like? If someone does have to touch it, how many hours a year does that take?

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A quick reference

Question	What to look for	Red flag
1. Rain and seasons	Dries fast, stays outside year-round	Holds water; needs covers or winter storage
2. Your climate	Comfortable surface temperature; UV and cold-rated materials	Dark metal in the sun; no UV rating; brittle in cold
3. Rust, rot, corrosion	Material that doesn't corrode; salt-tolerant	Coated steel; untreated wood; exposed fasteners
4. Movable and permanent	A deliberate mix; permanent pieces can be anchored	Heavy-looking pieces that can't be secured
5. Work surface and access	Smooth, stable surface; room for wheelchairs	Mesh tops; one seat height; tight spacing
6. Maintenance and cost	Low labor hours; ten-year cost known	Annual refinishing; costs left out of the quote

Every one of these problems is solvable with the right materials. It's worth knowing to look for them before you buy, not after.

These questions work best alongside a site plan. Consult a local architecture and design firm for the layout, shade, drainage, anchoring, and code requirements specific to your school and climate, and bring these six questions to them when you choose furniture.

For the research behind these recommendations, including cited studies on outdoor learning outcomes, climate-specific design, and cost, see Tenjam's white paper, The Case for Outdoor Learning.

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