

NOVEMBER 2021

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

little school at Kids Cottage



Learning outside is "Life Changing" at the little school



DELAWARE INSTITUTE FOR
Excellence in
Early Childhood

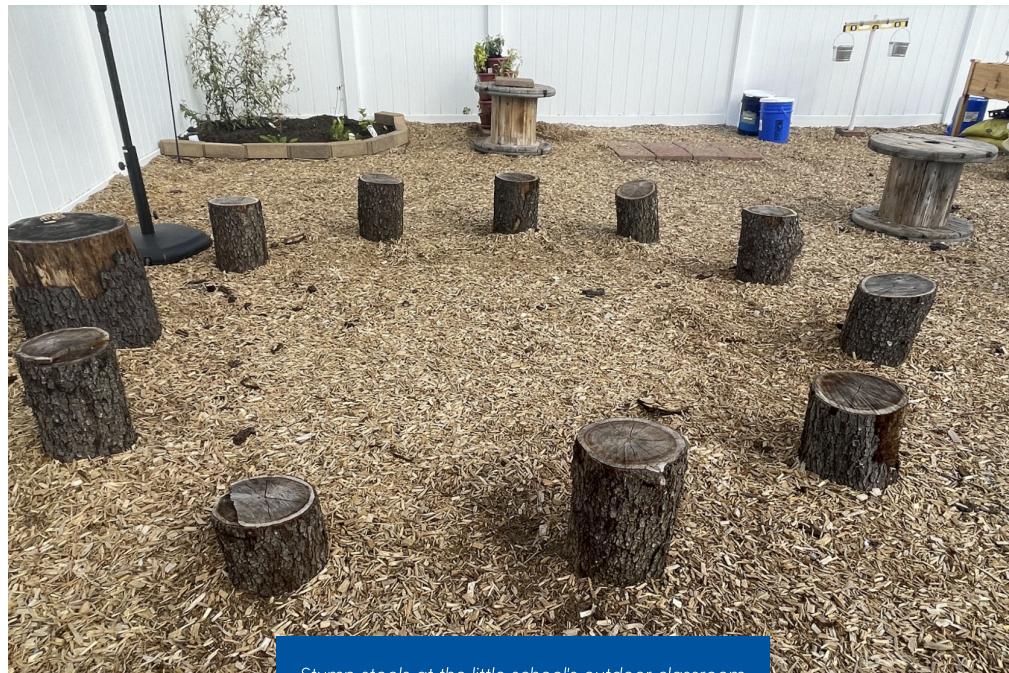
"The new use of this space is life-changing for our staff and children."

Lisa Ratliff, program co-owner and co-director

Interview by Lin Nordmeyer

The little school at Kids Cottage website banner reads: “Discovery. We value an environment that promotes hands-on exploration and design our spaces to promote discovery.”

With the support of the “Let’s Go Outside” grant from the DIEEC, this early childhood education program in Dover, Del. put that value into practice by creating an outdoor classroom for its students, ages twelve months through pre-kindergarten.



Stump stools at the little school's outdoor classroom space where children can learn and collaborate.

"The new use of this space is life-changing for our staff and children," said Lisa Ratliff, program co-owner and co-director. "It's a mindset shift for our staff, but we are learning and supporting each other in what can be accomplished outside. The hands-on learning also fits nicely with our curriculum."

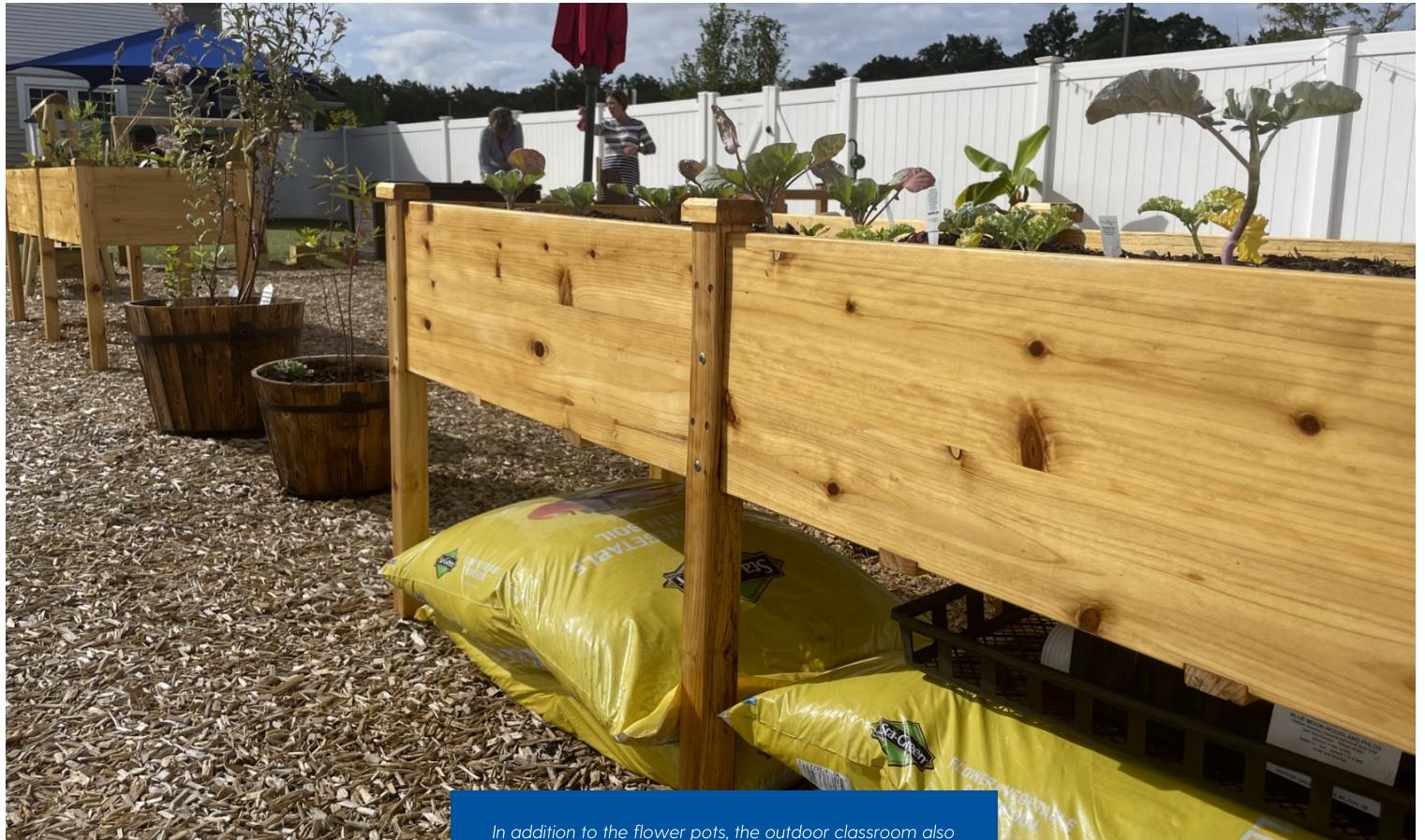
To help with the new teaching strategy, Lisa and Heather Barrows, a three-year-old teacher, attended the professional development "Outdoor Classrooms: Wonder, Explore, Learn." They also worked with the DIEC's Christine Skrobot and University of Delaware's Lab School master teacher, Katie Pollock, to design the outdoor space.

"I'm especially passionate about the value of learning outdoors."

*Miss Heather
Three-year-old
teacher*



Greenery and plant life, such as the stacked flower pots above, line the outdoor classroom.



In addition to the flower pots, the outdoor classroom also features garden boxes, pictured above.

And what resulted is “mind-blowing,” according to Lisa. The little school converted one corner of their play area into an outdoor classroom equipped with a mud station, multiple planters, a garden bed, and all sorts of gadgets.

“For our three-year and four-year-old children, we hold regular classes in the space,” said Lisa.

“For our younger children, we give them plenty of opportunities to explore and play in the classroom.”

“To differentiate the playground from this space we bring the kids in through a separate entrance. We want to be sure that this unique learning opportunity is utilized differently than our playground.”

Lisa credits Miss Heather with spearheading the mindset shift for the little school’s staff. She is helping teachers develop their lesson plans and be intentional about limiting indoor time. “I’m especially passionate about the value of learning outdoors,” said Miss Heather. “I grew up in Vermont where being outdoors is a part of your upbringing and I have seen firsthand the health benefits and its appeal for all kinds of learners.”

So far, the response from the families and the children is positive.

"At a recent open house, the families were intrigued," said Lisa. "Now, they are contributing loose parts for the classroom."

"Children are natural explorers," said Miss Heather. She and Lisa recounted how a group of three-year-old students recently discovered bees' pollen pouches and spent fifteen minutes learning about their function.

The vision for the center is to create additional outdoor classrooms in the playground area. However, both Lisa and Miss Heather encourage all early childhood education programs to go outdoors. "It doesn't have to be a big project," said Miss Heather. "You can start small with plants and greenery and go from there."



The loose parts station, pictured above, incorporates natural elements like rocks and stones to enhance imagination and problem-solving.



The garden box from another angle. This particular box features some newly-planted vegetables.