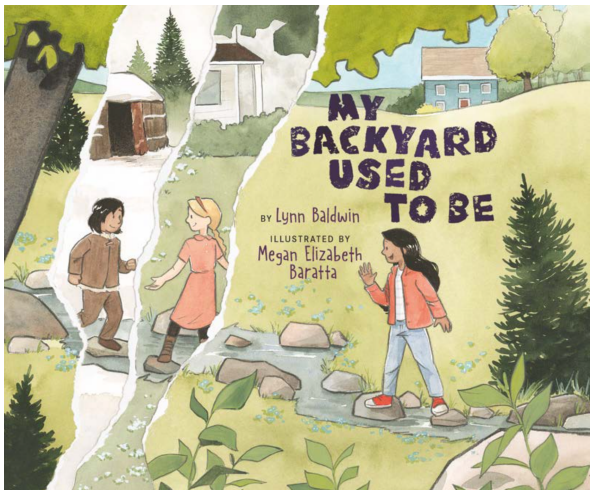




A teacher's guide
created by Marcie Colleen
based upon the picture book
written by Lynn Baldwin and
illustrated by Megan Elizabeth Barratta

This classroom guide is designed for students in first through fourth grade. It is assumed that teachers will adapt each activity to fit the needs and abilities of their own students.

It offers activities to help teachers integrate *My Backyard Used to Be* into the curricula.

All activities were created in conjunction with the Common Core and other relevant content standards.

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Before You Read...

Look closely at the Front Cover of *My Backyard Used to Be*.

- Read the title aloud. What do you think this book will be about?
- Describe what you see in the illustration. Who might the children be?
- What do you think the phrase "used to be" means? What does it make you wonder?
- Predict what kinds of changes a backyard might have gone through over time.

Now read or listen to the book.

Help students summarize in their own words what the book is about.

- What does the main character discover about her backyard?
- How does the book show that the land has changed over time?
- Which spread surprised you the most? Why?
- Did anything in the story remind you of your own backyard, park, or playground?

Let's talk about the people who made *My Backyard Used to Be*?

- Who is the author?
- Who is the illustrator?
- What kind of work did each person do to make the book?

Now, let's look closely at the illustrations.

- The illustrations in *My Backyard Used to Be* show how the same land changes over time—from fields and farms to construction sites to modern backyards.
- How does the way the children play differ or stay the same over time?
- Which types of play shown in the book are things that you do?

- Notice how the illustrator uses color, perspective, and playful motion to bring each version of the backyard to life.
- Draw two pictures of your own neighborhood: one of how it looks today, and one imagining what it might have looked like long ago—or what it could look like in the future. You can choose to draw in the style of Megan Elizabeth Barrata or your own style.

Language

The text of *My Backyard Used to Be* is filled with playful rhythms and patterns that make it fun to read aloud. The author uses repetition, sound words (onomatopoeia), and alliteration to give the story energy and movement.

- Onomatopoeia: These are words that imitate sounds, like “smash-smash-stomp,” “POP POP,” or “blurb blurb.” They help us hear the action and bring the story to life. Read a few of these aloud as a class—what do they sound like? How do they make you feel?
- Alliteration: This is when words that are close together start with the same sound, like “splash-smash-stomp.” Find examples in the text and discuss how repeating the same sound creates rhythm. Try saying them quickly—do they sound like music?
- Repetition: The phrase “used to be” appears throughout the book. Talk about how this repetition helps structure the story, reminding readers of the changes over time. Why might the author have chosen to use the same phrase again and again?

Invite students to play with these devices in their own writing:

Poetry Challenge

Write a short poem about your backyard, playground, or neighborhood.

- Include at least one onomatopoeia (a sound word like *crunch*, *zoom*, or *splash*).
- Add at least one example of alliteration (two or more words in a row that start with the same sound, like *slippery slide* or *buzzing bees*).
- Use the phrase “used to be” to show how the place has changed (for example, “This playground used to be an empty lot”).

Onomatopoeia Hunt

Practice listening for the sounds around you and turning them into words too!

1. Set the Scene
 - Explain that students are going to be “sound detectives,” searching for noises in their environment and writing them down.
 - Remind them that sound words don’t have to be “real” words—sometimes we make them up to match the sound (like *whishhhh* or *crunch-crackle*).
2. The Hunt
 - Take a short walk around the classroom, hallway, or playground.
 - Students should listen closely and write down at least five sounds they hear. Examples:
 - The hum of the air conditioner (*hummm*)
 - The scrape of a chair (*screeeech*)
 - Footsteps in the hall (*tap-tap-tap*)
 - Leaves blowing outside (*whoosh!*)
3. Share and Compare
 - Back in the classroom, ask students to share their favorite sound words. Write them on the board to create a “Sound Word Bank.”

- Notice how different students might describe the same sound differently. (One person might write *boom* while another writes *bang*.)

Social Studies & History

What Stays the Same / What Changes

My Backyard Used to Be shows how the same piece of land can transform again and again—from a farm to a construction site to modern backyards. At the same time, certain elements remain constant.

- As a class, create a two-column chart on the board labeled “What Stays the Same” and “What Changes.”
- Look at several spreads together and brainstorm examples:
 - *Stays the Same*: Trees, nature, children’s play, families gathering together.
 - *Changes*: The people who live there, the buildings and structures, the games children play, the languages spoken.
- Notice repeating elements in the book, such as baskets, used throughout. What does this suggest about continuity across time?

Whose Backyard?

Every backyard, playground, or park has a history.

- Discuss how Native Americans were the first to live on this land, and importantly, how Native communities are still present and active today. Emphasize that Indigenous people are not only part of history but part of our neighborhoods, schools, and towns now.
- Research the Indigenous people of your region. What were the traditions, and contributions of the Indigenous people in your region?
- Similarly, discuss how immigrants have continued to arrive, each bringing traditions, skills, and stories, adding to the community’s history.
- Research the immigrant groups who settled in your area. Where did they come from? Why did they move here? How did they shape the community?
- What challenges might non-English speaking immigrants face when they are new here?

Backyard Timeline

Together as a class, create a visual “Backyard Timeline” of the land that your school sits on.

1. Roll out a long sheet of butcher paper.
2. Mark off time periods (e.g., “long ago,” “hundreds of years ago,” “when our grandparents were kids,” “today”).
3. Add drawings or words to show how the land might have been used at each stage.
4. Display the finished timeline in the classroom to spark ongoing discussion.

Your Backyard's History

Encourage students to connect the book to their own lives:

- Ask: *What do you think your backyard (or street, schoolyard, or town) used to be?*
- How might it be similar to or different from what's shown in the book?
- Send students home with an "oral history assignment": interview a parent, grandparent, or neighbor to learn how the land has changed. They might discover that their school used to be a farm, or that their neighborhood was once an empty field or forest.
- Back in class, students can share their findings and add them to the "Backyard Timeline."

Extension:

Visit the local historical society, library, or archives. Invite a community elder or local historian to speak about how the neighborhood has changed.

Students can then compare this real history with the imagined changes in *My Backyard Used to Be*.

Science

Seasons in the Backyard

In *My Backyard Used to Be*, the illustrations show trees and landscapes shifting over time. Some of these changes happen slowly, over many years, while others happen each year as the seasons cycle.

- Discuss as a class: *How do trees change in spring, summer, fall, and winter?* Think about leaves, flowers, fruit, seeds, and even the animals that use the trees.
- Make a class chart of the four seasons and list changes students notice in trees and other plants.
- Have each student draw a tree in all four seasons. Under each drawing, they should write one sentence using the structure:
 - *In the spring, my tree used to be ____ but now it is ____.*
 - Example: "My tree used to be bare, but now it is covered with blossoms."
- Extension: If possible, take a "nature walk" outside to look for clues about the current season. Students can sketch what they see and imagine what it will look like in the next season.

Caring for Nature

The backmatter of *My Backyard Used to Be* shares ideas like planting native plants and creating butterfly gardens. These are small steps families can take to support local ecosystems.

- Discuss: *Why do we need to take care of nature right where we live?*
 - How do plants and animals depend on each other?
 - How do we depend on plants, trees, and pollinators like butterflies and bees?

- Brainstorm as a class a list of things families can do to keep their yards, playgrounds, and neighborhoods healthy.

Examples:

- Plant a tree or flowers for pollinators.
- Reduce pesticide use.
- Compost food scraps.
- Pick up litter in local parks.
- Use reusable water bottles instead of plastic ones.

Backyard Pledge

- As a class, create a “Backyard Pledge” with 3–5 commitments to protecting nature.
- Each student can illustrate one part of the pledge (e.g., “I will plant flowers for bees” or “I will recycle paper”).
- Put the illustrated pledge together as a classroom poster to hang on the wall.

Extensions:

- Pollinator Study: Research the butterflies and bees native to your area. Which flowers do they like best? Create a “Pollinator Guide” for your class.
- Food Web Game: Draw a web linking local plants, insects, birds, and mammals to show how one change in the environment affects them all.
- Citizen Science: Participate in a local tree-planting day, litter clean-up, or nature observation project.

Art

Our Backyard Murals

In *My Backyard Used to Be*, the illustrations show how one place can transform again and again. Students can explore this same idea by imagining what their own backyard, neighborhood, or schoolyard used to be—and what it looks like now.

- Provide each student with a large sheet of paper folded in half, or two connected sheets.
- On the left side (“Before”), students draw what they imagine the land looked like in the past. Encourage creativity—maybe it was farmland, a forest, a playground, or even empty fields.
- On the right side (“Now”), they draw what the land looks like today, including houses, stores, roads, or familiar play spaces.
- When complete, display the artwork side by side on a bulletin board to create a “Backyard Timeline Gallery.”
- Extension: Add a “Future” panel where students illustrate what they hope their backyard or neighborhood will look like years from now—perhaps with more trees, pollinator gardens, or community spaces.

Nature Collage

Celebrate the plants and natural life that make each community unique.

- Take a short nature walk around the school or neighborhood. Students can gather small, safe items like fallen leaves, twigs, pinecones, or blades of grass.
- Alternatively, provide printed photos of local plants, birds, and insects if collecting natural items isn't possible.
- Back in the classroom, give students paper, glue, and markers. Encourage them to combine their found or printed items into a collage of their backyard ecosystem.
- Students can label their collages with words from the book, like "used to be" and "is now," or create captions imagining what their natural materials once were (e.g., "This leaf used to be a bud").
- Display collages together to form a "Community Nature Quilt."

Extensions:

- 3-D Art: Use recycled boxes, clay, or building materials to create a diorama of a "used to be/now" backyard scene.
- Community Mural: Collaborate on a large mural for the classroom wall showing the timeline of land: long ago, today, and in the future.
- Sensory Art: Instead of only drawing, use rubbings (crayons over bark or leaves) to add texture to students' backyard murals or collages.
- Art & Story Connection: Pair each artwork with a short-written description or poem using onomatopoeia, alliteration, or the phrase "used to be" (tying back to the Language Arts section).