

# Giving our Children an Experiential Edge

## A Discussion Paper on Outdoor Learning in New Brunswick



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New Brunswick Environmental Network





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**NEW BRUNSWICK ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK**

**RÉSEAU ENVIRONNEMENTAL DU NOUVEAU-BRUNSWICK**

## How to Use this Discussion Paper

This document was created for the many sectors and stakeholders in New Brunswick's school community.

- Educators can use this Paper to draw real-world examples for their course development.
- School administrators and community members can use this document to understand or guide the creation of school policies, create programming, or the support development of outdoor learning environments.
- Ministers and politicians may find this document informative in helping to inspire/inform education policy.
- New Brunswick's Department of Transportation and Infrastructure can find helpful actions to support schools in their projects and make natural ecosystems more accessible.

For additional support in how to use this document or for more information, please contact the New Brunswick Environmental Network at [nben@nben.ca](mailto:nben@nben.ca).



# Executive Summary



The New Brunswick public education system already has almost all the tools and resources needed to make outdoor learning a permanent and mandated part of the public school curriculum.

This document makes suggestions on how to address the remaining gaps, overcome common barriers, and access useful resources.

Building on the Government of New Brunswick's 2019 Green Paper "Succeeding at Home: A green paper on education in New Brunswick", this Discussion Paper recommends a multi-sectoral strategy to successfully implement outdoor teaching and learning as an official and required pillar of the New Brunswick public education curriculum.

This document demonstrates how teaching and learning outdoors aligns with each of New Brunswick's six Global Competencies, provides valuable experiential learning for all ages groups and subjects, and offers simple and achievable solutions to many of the challenges outlined in the Green Paper.



# Introduction



In 2019, the Government of New Brunswick released their Green Paper, *Succeeding at Home: A green paper on education in New Brunswick*, which offered “ideas on how to make our [New Brunswick] education system, from birth to high school graduation, the best in the world.” In 2020, several groups involved with, or advocates of, outdoor learning responded to the Green Paper in a letter titled *A Safe and Effective Strategy for Reopening Schools Following the First COVID-19 Pandemic Wave*<sup>1</sup> hereinafter referred to as *Safe and Effective Strategy*. This letter highlights the notable omission of time spent learning outdoors from the list of ideas proposed in the 2019 Green Paper. A *Safe and Effective Strategy* summarises that teaching and learning outdoors align with all six of New Brunswick’s Global Competencies, and offers a simple and achievable solution to many of the challenges outlined by the Green Paper.

The aim of this discussion paper is to demonstrate the ways that outdoor learning addresses a variety of goals laid out in the 2019 Green Paper, expand on several points addressed in A *Safe and Effective Strategy* response and provide solutions to common barriers educators encounter when introducing outdoor learning strategies. This discussion paper recommends the implementation of outdoor teaching and learning as an official and required pillar of the New Brunswick public education curriculum.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix B, page 24.

Currently, in New Brunswick education policy, only licensed Early Child Education (ECE) facilities are required to have mandated outdoor time (minimum of two hours per day). When children enter kindergarten, this is no longer a requirement. In order to maximize benefits and success, we recommend a period of five years in which schools incrementally work toward a standard of at least 10 hours per week spent learning outdoors (44% of the week for K-2, 36% for 3-8, 33% for 9-12). This discussion paper will demonstrate that integrating outdoor teaching and learning into curricula for all age groups beyond ECE is indeed an attainable goal, provides better learning outcomes for both educators and students, improves mental health and emotional well-being, and is central to youth climate action. A steady progression to this standard over five years, along with the necessary support, resources, and training that teachers will require, is a necessary step in making the New Brunswick education system a world-class example of quality scholarship.

## Benefits of Outdoor Learning



Enhanced physical well-being including reduced rates of diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic diseases



Enhanced mental well-being including reduced levels of anxiety and depression



Children are more engaged in learning, are better able to concentrate, and are better behaved



Positive associations between the greenness of school landscapes and academic performance, such as standardized test scores and rates of graduation



Children are more likely to become lifelong stewards of nature and climate champions





# What is Outdoor Learning?



In common parlance, many terms get used interchangeably to describe the concept of bringing the classroom outdoors.

Historically, bringing your classroom outdoors or “outdoor education” meant learning about the outdoors (learning about nature, survival skills, etc) and was applied to only specific topics in subjects like science or physical education. Many educators might still understand outdoor learning by this definition, however, it has evolved into something much more comprehensive.

Today, outdoor teaching or outdoor learning can describe the act of an educator taking their class — no matter the subject — outdoors, and incorporating aspects of the outdoors into their lesson plan to facilitate their teaching or to meet curriculum goals.

***“Outdoor education can be applied to any discipline that can be effectively taught and learned outside. For example, outdoor education could mean teaching the concept of an acre by measuring a playing field (mathematics); or visiting a park to write poetry or draw pictures inspired by the setting (language arts and art); or recording the information found in a cemetery to learn about past events (history); or testing the pH to determine if a nearby stream is acid or alkaline (science); or climbing a hill to calculate student heart rates (physical education)” (StateUniversity, n.d.)***

Outdoor teaching and outdoor learning can be thought of as a sub-category of experiential learning, which is defined as:

***“...a challenge and experience followed by reflection leading to learning and growth. Experiential education is a teaching philosophy that informs many methodologies in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities.” (Association for Experiential Learning, n.d.)***

It is important to note that outdoor learning does not include on-the-land learning or land-based learning. On-the-land learning or land-based learning can be briefly summarized as the teaching of cultural and traditional practices by Indigenous educators, Elders, or Knowledge Keepers to Indigenous students. While much of the content of this document takes place outdoors and uses nature as a teaching tool, on-the-land learning is culturally specific and beyond the scope of this discussion paper, the focus of which is on public schools.





# Benefits of Outdoor Learning - Fulfilling the New Brunswick Global Competencies and Meeting Goals in the Ten-Year Education Plan



*I don't want to merely replicate the same approach taken inside the traditional classroom to an outdoor setting. When I go outside, when my students are working on projects (we often do projects to improve the community or help someone), I want to give students time to breathe, question, hypothesize, look for answers, co-construct their knowledge, talk to experts, read, research, use technology for projects, develop skills, create, etc. I want to be flexible. I don't want to be the one who simply "passes them knowledge" inside or outside. But all of this is easier said than done... it takes TIME."*

**New Brunswick Public School Teacher**

In consultation on the discussion paper  
Translated from the original French

In 2017, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) introduced the New Brunswick Global Competencies which details six categories of skills, knowledge sets, and attitudes intended to guide curricula in order to give learners the skills needed to lead a successful life (Government of New Brunswick, 2019). The 2019 Green Paper stated that EECD is focused on working towards achieving these Global Competencies through the curriculum. Multidisciplinary outdoor learning provides a fast-tracked method of achieving this goal. The table below indicates the benefits conferred to students by outdoor learning and how each of these benefits fulfills a number of the New Brunswick Global Competencies. By implementing outdoor learning into the public education system, EECD can achieve its goal of ensuring that students gain the skills, knowledge sets, and attitudes that are outlined by all six Global Competencies.

In addition, outdoor learning links seamlessly with the province's ten-year education plan. Outdoor learning at all ages builds upon each of the three broad goals for the Francophone sector's Profil de sortie d'un élève (Une citoyenneté engagée et éthique, Un désir d'apprendre tout au long de sa vie, Une vie équilibrée). On the Anglophone side, Everyone At Their Best defines education as "no longer limited to the classroom" (page 4). Outdoor learning builds on each of the four fundamental principles outlined in the document (Learners make informed decisions about their overall wellness; Learners take initiative, persevere, and embrace innovation and improvement; Learners understand global issues, value diversity, and collaborate to improve their world; Learners are curious, reflective problem-solvers, and effective communicators).

“ I know teachers who would go out more if they didn't feel the pressure to go, fast! fast! fast! to "cover the curriculum". We have a beautiful natural classroom, built by my students, yet teachers feel that they don't have time to both go outside and still do everything that is required of them. The number of documented tasks may have been good when we were teaching using a more traditional lecture-based approach, but now it doesn't work anymore.

*We have to remember that going outside takes more minutes of the day, so it's normal that we'll do fewer activities per day... but... we'll do them better."*

**New Brunswick Public School Teacher**  
in consultation on the discussion paper  
Translated from the original French





Benefit conferred by outdoor learning	Specific examples from the literature	New Brunswick Global Competency fulfilled by benefit
<b>Improved social interaction skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased prosocial behaviour and general improvement in social interaction skills<sup>2,3,4</sup></li> <li>• Increased empathy<sup>5</sup></li> <li>• Increase in trusting relationships, and sense of belonging among peers<sup>6</sup></li> <li>• Increased cooperation, accountability and supportive social relationships<sup>5,7</sup></li> <li>• Decrease in disrespectful behaviour between students<sup>7</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Awareness and Self-Management</li> <li>• Sustainability and Global Citizenship</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> </ul>
<b>Improved well-being and sense of self</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved self-esteem and self-confidence<sup>3,6</sup></li> <li>• Increased feelings of independence and personal autonomy<sup>3,7,8</sup></li> <li>• Overall improved well-being and quality of life<sup>9,10</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovation, Creativity and Entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Self-Awareness and Self-Management</li> <li>• Sustainability and Global Citizenship</li> <li>• Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving</li> </ul>
<b>Improved mental health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decreased anxiety and stress<sup>5,7</sup></li> <li>• Improved responsible decision making<sup>4</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-Awareness and Self-Management</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> </ul>
<b>Improved learning skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved skills in problem-solving and creativity<sup>3</sup></li> <li>• Increased capacity to self-direct<sup>8</sup></li> <li>• Improved self-management skills<sup>4</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovation, Creativity and Entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Self-Awareness and Self-Management</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> <li>• Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup>Bølling et al., 2019

<sup>3</sup>Coates and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019

<sup>4</sup>Price, 2019

<sup>5</sup>Gilligan and Downes, 2021

<sup>6</sup>Becker et al., 2017

<sup>7</sup>Chawla et al., 2014

<sup>8</sup>Slee and Allan, 2019

<sup>9</sup>Guardino et al., 2019

<sup>10</sup>Ekenga et al., 2019

There are additional benefits to students conferred by outdoor learning that may not directly satisfy a Global Competency but add to overall student success, including fewer distractions, the ability to stay on task more easily, longer sustained focus, and less hyperactivity and inattentiveness (Bølling, et al., 2019; Chawla, et al., 2014; Guardino et al., 2019; Largo-Wight, et al., 2018). Learning benefits are especially pronounced for neurodivergent students or those with special needs (Guardino et al., 2019; Price 2019; Slee and Allan, 2019). Outdoor learning can even lead to improved overall academic performance and an improved ability to transfer skills to real-life situations (Becker et al., 2017), which is the overall goal of the Global Competencies — to prepare students for a successful life.

The benefits of outdoor learning are not limited to just students, as educators also experience improvements in their teaching and mental health. Early childhood educators note that they feel less of a need to manage students' behaviour during outdoor activities (Schlembach et al., 2018), and teachers often need to re-direct and manage their students less often when in outdoor classrooms (Largo-Wight et al., 2018). Teachers also experience mental health benefits and report that outdoor classrooms led to an increased sense of overall well-being (Guardino et al., 2019). In recent years, outdoor teaching and learning as a means to relieve anxiety about COVID-19 and to reduce disease transmission in open-air environments have been widely cited by health officials around the world. Outdoor learning was also noted as a contributing strategy to keep students healthy in the New Brunswick Back-To-School plan by Minister Cardy in 2021 (Government of New Brunswick, 2021).





# Jurisdictional Scan



In general, outdoor learning has seen wider acceptance and establishment in countries outside North America. In particular, the Forest School model, which is one of the earliest models of outdoor education, is encouraged in official education policy in Scandinavian countries. Though there are some examples of publicly funded forest schools in Scandinavia, they are generally considered to be inadequately resourced and remain largely dependent on the commitment of hard-working teachers. That said, the Scandinavian Forest School model is a good model and has seen great uptake and success in the United Kingdom as well. In New Brunswick, the only policy related to mandated outdoor learning is for early childhood facilities, where children must be outside for a minimum of two hours a day. While elementary school-aged children participate in recess, this outdoor time is treated as a break from class rather than a valuable opportunity for experiential learning.

Across Canada, while there are no official public education curriculum policies related to mandating outdoor learning time above the early-childhood level, some provinces have expressed a more accepting attitude towards outdoor learning than others.



## Maple Ridge Environmental School

Since August 2008, the Maple Ridge Environmental School Project has been working to bring together the community of Maple Ridge to establish a public K-7 school and learning centre. The theory and practice of the project are supported by Place-Based, Imaginative, and Ecological Education. Learning and teaching are experiential, in context, and through activities that engage the mind, body, and heart. The project is based on principles of inquiry and inclusion. Teaching and learning will involve reconnecting the natural and human worlds. As a public school in British Columbia, it will meet all the requirements of the School Act. To learn more visit: <https://es.sd42.ca/>

## Great Minds Think Outside

Great Minds Think Outside is a professional learning program that equips educators with practical tools to teach their students outside in any subject, age, or season. Each session is tailored to the schools' needs and interests, including age group, subject, and the greenspaces the school has access to. The teachers learn fundamental class management techniques for the outdoor environment, practice activities relevant to their curriculum, and receive access to 40 NB-specific activities and free online banks of searchable and educator-tested lesson plans. The program has been carefully created to link seamlessly with the NB curriculum, and allows teachers to diversify their methods while encouraging a love of nature at a young age. To learn more, visit : [www.sea-nb.ca](http://www.sea-nb.ca)





For example, in 2017, the Ontario Ministry of Education released a curriculum resource guide that mandated that environmental education should be a part of all curricula for students in Kindergarten to Grade 8 (Government of Ontario, 2017). The guide gives examples of how to use environmental concepts in subjects not usually considered to have environmental components, such as mathematics and social studies. On outdoor education, the guide states that bringing classrooms outdoors is an effective teaching tool and “not only offers a unique context for learning but also provides experiential learning outside the classroom to foster a connection to local places and to develop a greater understanding of ecosystems” (Government of Ontario, 2017).

Another Canadian example is Forest School Canada, an initiative established in 2012 by the Child and Nature Alliance of Canada. Their initiative follows the model of outdoor, experiential, and inquiry-based learning that was first developed in Scandinavia in the 1950s (Forest School Canada, 2014a). Forest and Nature Schools involve regular and repeated sessions in the same outdoor space where educators are the facilitator rather than the expert, and value process over outcome. Forest and Nature Schools have been established across Canada, but are most common in British Columbia (Forest School Canada, 2014b). While these schools offer an opportunity for students to experience outdoor learning as a regular part of their schooling, they are often privately funded and require program fees to attend, making them inaccessible to many families. However, publicly funded forest schools do exist, such as the Maple Ridge school in British Columbia, which is a publicly funded K-7 school where learning and teaching take place almost exclusively outdoors.

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted public school systems in Canada to value outdoor time as a way to prevent COVID-19 spread. For example, in New Brunswick, for students in K-12, teachers are now encouraged to take their physical education, music classes, and any other “activities and learning” outdoors as long as weather permits (Government of New Brunswick, 2021). In April 2021, Nova Scotia received federal funding through Infrastructure Canada’s COVID-19 Resilience Stream of the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program to create outdoor learning spaces for elementary schools to reduce the risk of COVID-19 (Infrastructure Canada, 2021). While these guidelines and programs do not constitute mandatory policy and were not created for the value of outdoor learning in its own right, they signal a shift in the attitudes towards how government and policymakers feel about outdoor learning. If anything, these changes due to COVID-19 have proven that it is possible to take your class outdoors regularly, and educators have undoubtedly begun to develop the skills to do so.

# Effective Outdoor Learning



In order to better inform the writing of this discussion paper, its authors held interviews with leaders and advocates in outdoor learning with teachers, outdoor educators, stakeholders, and program coordinators in the NB education system. Through these interviews, common barriers to outdoor learning were identified and compiled below, demonstrating that many of these barriers can be overcome by simple solutions not limited to those suggested here.

## **How to address the difficulty in linking to curriculum and difficulty in finding time to reformat lesson plans to outdoor settings:**

In the same way that teachers benefit from having curriculum leads for subjects such as sciences, Indigenous learning, and climate action, creating a position for a curriculum specialist and/or a Centre of Excellence devoted to quality outdoor learning would transform access to resources for educators. The curriculum specialist in outdoor learning would be able to expedite access to needed resources and provide the support teachers need by working with Community Engagement Coordinators and Agent•es de développement, thereby minimizing the strain educators currently face when trying to meet their outdoor learning goals. Many resources exist in NB and across Canada on how to link outdoor learning/teaching techniques to curricula. A non-comprehensive list can be



accessed at <https://climateeducation.nben.ca/resources/> and at <https://db.nben.ca/earthed>. A proven online and cellphone friendly student learning portfolio with outcomes would drastically shift access for teachers as well and could be developed with a team at the Department of Education and nonprofit organization support in the same way that the Climate Action Grants programs have been developed in the 2021-22 school year with two new climate change education specialists.

### **How to address a lack of time and resources (i.e., funding, guidance):**

New Brunswick boasts a wealth of experts in outdoor learning who are ready to provide professional learning to schools on PD days, but it is difficult to find times for schools to access that service. Additional half-day PD sessions funded by districts and staggered throughout the school year would alleviate this barrier.

#### **Lesson idea**

Use trees to study geometry and formulas. Measure their trunks to practice with circumference, compare branches to discuss scale, make crafts with leaves to identify shapes, and estimate heights from a distance for Pythagorean Theorem



#### **How to address the fear or worry of doing it incorrectly, including fears surrounding safety and risk:**

Training! Include outdoor learning components for teachers-in-training at all faculties of education, with mandated PD days for refreshers. Implement pilot projects in certain select schools to serve as case studies.

#### **How to address equity issues (e.g., students equipped with inadequate outdoor clothing or learning supplies):**

Schools can be provided funding for winter clothing closets for students in need. Outdoor clothing would be added to the lists of school supplies required at the beginning of the year. This needs to be addressed by funding at the provincial level and supported by school coordinators/agents de développement. This also addresses the misconception

that bad weather precludes outdoor learning – as the adage goes, there is no such thing as bad weather, just inappropriate clothing.

That being said, many students do face financial barriers to proper outdoor clothing and materials. EECD would be able to mitigate this by including outdoor wear into grants and funding already accessible to low-income families, similar to the laptops offered to students in need when school first went virtual in the early stages of the pandemic.

**How to address a lack of staff continuity (e.g., continuing outdoor learning if a champion teacher with the bulk of knowledge/resources on outdoor learning leaves or changes schools):**

**Lesson idea**

Practice narrative form, creative writing and communication by tracking seasonal changes in a recurring location and building stories around them. Share the stories orally or write and illustrate them using loose parts



As more educators become accustomed to the benefits of outdoor learning, this problem will disappear. However, a departmental level person for each school district tasked with planning and creating these resources could be implemented to alleviate the burden. Curriculum specialists can work with local outdoor learning experts to create an easily accessible list of examples in their subject based on work that has already been completed locally. School coordinators/agents de développement can be equipped with a list of local experts (for example, from Earth Ed [db.nben.ca/earthed](http://db.nben.ca/earthed)) to ask questions and make school visits as needed. The wealth of ready-made curriculum already available online could be vetted and made available on the teacher's regular Teams site, for example, through the Réseau maker naturel / Natural Maker Space for those with an @nbed.ca email address. EECD Centres of Excellence connect students to expert knowledge through virtual and experiential learning. A new Centre of Excellence on outdoor learning and the natural sciences could provide teachers with resources to help



connect students to a range of opportunities for future careers in nature.

### **How to address the perception that winters in New Brunswick are too cold for learning outdoors:**

With proper preparedness and supplies, there is no need to decrease the time spent learning outdoors in the wintertime. Scandinavia, a region known for its harsh, cold, and dark winters, is a global champion for outdoor learning year-round. See also the note above about equity issues and how there is no such thing as bad weather, just inappropriate clothing.

### **How to address concerns over lack of outdoor infrastructure:**

Though not much is needed to take a class outdoors, it is true that certain schools may have more access to green space or other outdoor infrastructure than others. Infrastructure may include things like a simple shelter from the elements, fire pits to warm up in winter, water fountains outside, places to eat or use the bathroom, storage, etc. New schools should include such basic infrastructure in their design from the outset with a percentage of the building lot reserved for green space. Existing schools with minimal access to appropriate outdoor spaces could explore collaborations with their municipality or local groups (nearby parks, yards of public buildings, etc).

#### **Lesson idea**

Connect biodiversity to statistics by tracking the presence of a species in the schoolyard over a certain time period. Re-enforce the lesson with physical activity by incorporating biodiversity tag games



#### **Lesson idea**

Discuss habitat, evolution, adaptation, engineering, mass, and displacement by comparing snowshoes, wild hare tracks, and moose or deer tracks in snow.

# Conclusion



It is clear that a world-class public education system is a primary goal of the New Brunswick government. While there are currently some programs in place that contribute to this goal (e.g., the Global Competency system), we still have improvements to make. Integrating outdoor learning as part of the curriculum at all age levels would accelerate our status to world-class and provide long-lasting benefits to both teacher and student success. In order to maximize benefits and successes, the recommendation of this discussion paper is to work toward a standard of at least ten hours per week spent learning outdoors. This would be similar to the amount of time mandated at the ECE level. However, at the ECE level, ten hours per week is approximately 50% of their instruction time (with an average ECE day of 4 hours). Thus, if ten hours per week is achievable at the ECE level, quality hands-on learning outdoors is also achievable at higher grades that include more instruction time overall.

Although this goal may seem lofty, it is realistic and achievable if worked towards over five years to ensure that this new mandate is implemented gradually and without overwhelming teaching staff. An incremental change will ensure that staff have time to plan, build skills, and adjust curriculum along with a devoted curriculum specialist and/or a Centre of Excellence in Outdoor Learning. There will be different challenges for different age groups - for example, the challenge of coordinating the schedules of older students will be complex as these students change classrooms more often than younger students. However, a gradual implementation will allow for plans to be made to find solutions for these types of challenges.



The New Brunswick public education system already has almost all the tools and resources needed to make outdoor learning a permanent and mandated part of the public school curriculum. This document makes suggestions on how to address the remaining gaps, overcome common barriers, and access useful resources.

Mandated outdoor learning is not just a suggestion on how to improve the public education system in New Brunswick, it is a necessity for setting our youth up for long term success and happiness both while they are in school and for long after they leave.



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# Appendix B:

## Safe and Effective Strategy

Various groups, signatures below  
c/o New Brunswick Environmental Network  
30 Gordon Street, Suite 103  
Moncton, NB  
E1C 1L8

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development  
Place 2000  
P. O. Box 6000  
Fredericton, NB  
E3B 5H1

June 3, 2020

**Subject: A Safe and Effective Strategy for Reopening Schools Following the First COVID-19 Pandemic Wave**

Dear Hon. Minister Cardy,

As New Brunswick moves forward after months of school closures, we are grateful for all the efforts made to keep New Brunswickers safe during the COVID-19 pandemic - your efforts, those of Dr. Jennifer Russell, and everyone else involved in making the necessary hard decisions, along with the dedication and professionalism of healthcare and other front-line workers, and the efforts of New Brunswick citizens to keep their families and communities safe. To minimize the risk of virus transmission and the impact of future outbreaks, the best way forward is to focus on outdoor learning for all schools and early childhood learning centres starting in September 2020. We are supportive of the Call to Action for Outdoor Learning to be Part of Reopening Strategies of Canadian Schools that was initiated by Learning for a Sustainable Future (LSF) across Canada.

A recent article in The Guardian, "Scotland eyes outdoor learning as a model for reopening schools," reveals that Scotland's school authorities are exploring using outdoor space to optimize physical distancing. Departments of Education and school boards across Canada should be exploring this opportunity as well.

Using outdoor space would allow a greater number of students to be accommodated at school while maintaining physical distancing requirements. Outdoor learning also allows for physical distancing to happen more naturally than confining students to their desks, and managing infection risk of COVID-19 is better outdoors.

A recent report from the Children and Nature Network<sup>[1]</sup> documents the benefits of learning outdoors including:

- enhanced physical wellbeing including reduced rates of diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic diseases
- enhanced mental wellbeing including reduced levels of anxiety and depression (critically important at this time)
- children are more engaged in learning (88%), are better able to concentrate (68%), and are better behaved (65%)
- positive associations between the greenness of school landscapes and academic performance, such as standardized test scores and rates of graduation

Experience in Scotland demonstrates that "there are not many things you can't teach outdoors, you just have to think creatively."<sup>[2]</sup>

COVID-19 presents an opportunity for Canadian schools to embed learning outdoors as part of our culture of education, both for the short-term benefits of better infection control and the long-term benefits of outdoor learning for our children's physical and mental health and academic success.

Teachers will need support and resources to return to school following COVID-19 closures. Why not invest in supporting schools with training and resources to support outdoor learning? Many schools in New Brunswick are already equipped with outdoor classrooms, and funding should be sourced to develop ones at the schools that are still lacking.

New Brunswick is home to many well-established outdoor education and professional learning programs to equip educators with facilitation skills for bilingual outdoor learning in any subject and age level, most notably the Great Minds Think Outside Program. One of the program partners, Brilliant Labs, has already received an Environmental Trust Fund grant to develop digital learning modules for teachers. This project could easily be expanded to have a province-wide reach, and a high-quality professional learning program for teachers would be ready to launch before the end of August. A module for Community Schools Coordinators and district leads could also be developed detailing a master list of programs, grants, field trips, and resources to further support teachers and administration in the successful implementation of outdoor, COVID-safe learning in every school.

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<sup>1</sup> Children & Nature Network, Connecting with Nature to Care for Ourselves and the Earth, 2018. <https://www.childrenandnature.org/wp-content/uploads/Connecting-with-Nature-Summary-English.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Brooks, Libby. "Scotland eyes outdoor learning as model for reopening of schools", The Guardian International Edition. May 10, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/may/10/scotland-eyes-outdoor-learning-as-model-for-reopening-of-schools>



With the help of national and local partners such as LSF, New Brunswick already contains the skills and resources needed to implement outdoor classrooms in September. All that is missing is support at the Department level. We are ready, and here to assist!

Sincerely,

Chantal Varin, Association francophone des parents du Nouveau-Brunswick  
Pamela Schwartzberg, Learning for a Sustainable Future  
Nadine Ives, Learning Outside – Conservation Council of NB  
Janet Doucet, Daly Point Nature Reserve  
Vanessa Roy-McDougall, Nature NB  
Michelle Thibault, Brilliant Labs  
Wiebke Tinney, Pays de Cocagne Sustainable Development Group  
Albi Sole, Outdoor Council of Canada  
Franz Plangger, Canadian Outdoor Summit  
Roland Chiasson, Aster Group  
Tegan Wong-Daugherty, Knowlesville Art and Nature Centre  
Sophie Alix Ruest, Symbiose  
Warren Redman, Save Wetlands Waters and Tourism  
Robin Hanson, Oromocto River Watershed Association  
Gregory Burton, Willow Farm  
Tim Borlase, Red Dot Association of Shediac Bay  
Sam Arnold, Sustainable Energy Group  
Julie Cormier, Vision H2O  
Gordon W. Dalzell, Saint John Citizens Coalition for Clean Air  
Wendy Keats, Co-operative Enterprise Council  
Sharon Murphy, PEACE-NB  
Renelle LeBlanc, Les projets aulnes  
Marilyn Merritt-Gray, Voices for Sustainable Environments and Communities