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# Leaders & Learners

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*Reimagining*  
Education

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# Are You In or Are You Out?

## Reimagining Education Without Doors



Encouraging daily time in fresh air and nature is incredibly beneficial to the health and well-being of students and staff. Photos courtesy of CBEEN.

Staff can weave outdoor and Indigenous learning together with ease by examining local place-based learning.



By Duncan Whittick,  
Canada's Outdoor Learning  
Partnership

**T**he pandemic has caused many Canadian educators to reimagine their teaching practice. While outdoor learning has been practiced in pockets for years, and the many benefits are well documented, the recent widespread adoption has caused reason to take note.

Enter Canada's Outdoor Learning Partnership – a pandemic poised consortium of 25 outdoor and environmental learning organizations. Not only has this partnership brought together school boards and organizations, but it has also provided a platform for schools to access excellent outdoor learning resources and equipment with proceeds going back to outdoor learning non-profits that support schools. Additionally, this partnership provides free virtual workshops and podcasts, shining a light on a diverse range of practices and practitioners. Over the past year, more than 2,500 Canadian schools have accessed resources and equipment through this platform, and over 10,000 teachers have registered for virtual workshops.

This collaboration largely took root because of the leadership of a committed group of school superintendents in the Kootenay region of Southeast British Columbia. In 2015, they

came together to prioritize outdoor learning, forming the Kootenay-Boundary Environmental Education Initiative (KBEE). Their efforts were recognized with receipt of the national award for environmental education in 2018, and their Take Me Outside for Learning School Year Challenge has now been adopted Canada-wide by Take Me Outside.

Jennifer Roberts, co-chair of the KBEE, reflected that, “It has been exciting to witness the growth of this initiative and to see the positive impacts in our schools. Teachers report that students are happier, healthier, more connected, and show an increased level of engagement when they are learning in an outdoor environment.”

Claire Guy, Executive Director of the British Columbia School Superintendents Association (BCSSA), shared that, “I was

so impressed with the work that the BCSSA leaders from the Kootenay-Boundary region had initiated, I featured them as the very first article for our *InspirED* journal, as it was such an engaging story. The work and commitment have taken off from there and motivated many others across our province to follow their lead.”

### Connecting with Indigenous perspectives and knowledge

Learning outdoors provides a natural opportunity for students to connect with Indigenous knowledge and perspectives. As identified in the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FNESC, 2020), “Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational, focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place.”



Faye O'Neil, Indigenous Advisor to Canada's Non-profit Outdoor Learning Store shared that, "I am excited to see teachers and students getting out on ʔamakʔis Ktunaxa learning on the land and experiencing local Indigenous perspectives and legends to help make the connection that we are all related."

Jenna Jasek, also an Indigenous Advisor to Canada's Non-profit Outdoor Learning Store, added that, "Educators can weave outdoor education and Indigenous perspectives and knowledge together with ease by examining local place-based learning. Being outdoors and using Indigenous perspectives provides various lessons all year through seasons, weather, astronomy, water, animals, and how to be stewards of the land. The relationship with the local area and being outdoors provides unlimited space for all learners."

### Mental health and wellness

Not only are we less likely to contract viruses when we spend time outdoors, but by going outside we better support the mental, physical, and emotional well-being of teachers and students.

In their provincial education revitalization plan the province of Quebec recently prioritized the objective to "increase opportunities to go outside, exercise, and enjoy the outdoors" as a measure to support well-being and mental health (For Educational Success: Education Beyond the Pandemic, 2021-2022).

### In Eastern Canada

The York Region District School Board launched the Get Outside initiative last spring. Over 120 of their elementary schools received clipboards, field guides, binoculars, and hand-held magnifiers to support the exploration of local nature spaces. Educators at these schools are participating in

professional book studies with one of the following books: *A Walking Curriculum*; *Braiding Sweetgrass*; *Messy Math*; *The Big Book of Nature*; *Natural Curiosity*; and *Teaching Kids about Climate Change*. All these resources are available on Canada's Non-profit Outdoor Learning Store.

At the District School Board of Niagara, they believe students enjoy an enriched learning experience when it takes place outdoors. To encourage this, they created an Outdoor Learning Kit for all elementary schools. These kits include resources for teachers and items to inspire wonder in students. An outdoor learning program guide was developed as an easy jumping in point for teachers. Three workshops with outdoor learning expert Megan Zeni were organized and helped inspire our teachers to take their learning outdoors.

As Thames Valley District School Board looks toward offering meaningful connections with their local environments, in Grade 9 Science they are equipping their students with the tools and skills to empower them to collect their own watershed data through stream studies, and then propose questions and courses of action to Conservation Authority partners.

### In the Prairies

Prairie Valley School Division encourages teachers to take their classrooms outdoors. The intent of their Outdoor Education programs is to use students' individual and group needs, along with local cultures and environments, to guide the direction of the outdoor activity or experience. Considerations for the principles of "Leave No Trace" and critical land-based learning should always be made.

Regina Public Schools Outdoor Education Department has seen a large increase in

teachers requesting out-of-city field trips. Three hundred and fifty teachers registered to take their classes to learn outdoors. These full day trips are curriculum-based and focused on critical place-based learning, which is then woven into what is being taught in the classroom.

### On the West Coast

Nisga'a School District encourages all teachers to spend time outside with their students as the Nass Valley offers an abundance of opportunity to learn on the land. The Nisga'a traditional harvesting calendar provides a guide to seasonal place-based cultural learning.

Cariboo Chilcotin School District is reimagining learning spaces with outdoor structures at all schools. Schools have created gardens, paths into adjacent wooded areas, mud kitchens, and added bikes, loose parts, and other features to entice being out and active. They have found that encouraging daily time in fresh air and nature is beneficial to the health and well-being of both students and staff. ○

*So, are you in or are you out? If you're in, and want more information, please contact Claire Guy, Executive Director, BCSSA, at [cguy@bcssa.org](mailto:cguy@bcssa.org); or Duncan Whittick, Executive Director, CBEEN, at [info@cbeen.org](mailto:info@cbeen.org).*

Readers of this story can **enter to win a \$100 Gift Card** to Canada's Non-profit Outdoor Learning Store! Visit [outdoorlearningstore.ca/cassa](http://outdoorlearningstore.ca/cassa) to learn more.

For more resources, connections, and inspiration:

- [www.outdoorlearningstore.ca](http://www.outdoorlearningstore.ca)
- [www.takemeoutside.ca](http://www.takemeoutside.ca)
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