

Why Outdoor Education Centres are a key to Education for the Future

Presentation to the Ottawa Carleton District School Board

May 14, 2007.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of COEO, The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario. I come to you as a former outdoor educator in the public school system. Among a variety of other field centre settings, I was a Peel District School Board teacher at one of its day-use outdoor centres for 12 years until it closed in June 1993 due to funding constraints. After a few years of an M.Ed. and classroom teaching, I then began working for Upper Canada College which, like many other independent schools, has an exceptionally strong commitment to outdoor education. I am now in my sixth year at UCC's Norval Outdoor School and I pinch myself every day, as I revel in the value of what I am doing. And, yet, I also remain greatly concerned by the public system's ongoing struggles to retain what little outdoor education it still has. I am convinced now, more than ever before, as to the vital role that outdoor experiences run by trained educators have in preparing our children for a healthy and sustainable future. This is why I serve on the Board of The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario, an organization that was formed in 1972 with help of leading lights from all over the province, including Rod Ferguson from the Ottawa area, and an organization that is committed to promoting outdoor education as a right for every public school student in Ontario. This is why I co-wrote COEO's just-published summary of current and international evidence-based research into the many powerful and lasting benefits of outdoor and experiential education for today's students. This is why I am speaking to you tonight.

I'd like to take this opportunity to commend the OCDSB on its longstanding and continuing commitment in the face of severe budget constraints to fund the Bill Mason and MacSkimming Outdoor Centres. It is my most sincere hope that the material I leave with you will more than justify your unwavering support for this key component of "education for the future."

While outdoor and experiential education (hereafter referred to as OEE) can be offered in a variety of settings, well-run and well-located outdoor education centres represent a program, cost and safety-effective way of delivering repeated hands-on contact with the outdoors for our children. Among the many positive features of outdoor centres are the following:

- Their carefully selected properties offer a variety of terrain and natural surroundings for year-round programming.
- Their well-trained staff are familiar with the site, a wide variety of programs, the students they teach and a host of risk management policies and practices that ensure safe program delivery.
- They serve as a permanent location for field equipment and resources to be shared throughout the Board.
- They offer an OEE professional development capacity for both field centre staff and visiting teachers.

And so, at these centres, our children can experience the four powerful and lasting values of OEE. These values are amply substantiated by the 101 references and 169 footnotes listed in the COEO Research Summary:

[POWERPOINT SLIDES BEGIN HERE]

First, OEE **educates for curriculum and community**.

Research shows that students using OEE and the local environment as a comprehensive focus and framework for curricula demonstrate, among other things,

- increased engagement with learning,
- improved academic performance including better language skills, and
- a variety of substantially increased critical thinking skills.

My own experiences also tell me that OEE can broaden and deepen curricula at all grade levels and within virtually every subject area.

Second, OEE **educates for lifelong physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing**. Research suggests that:

- Contact with nature is as important to children as good nutrition and adequate sleep.
- Time spent outdoors correlates with increased physical activity and fitness in children.
- Exposure to green space reduces crime and increases one's ability to focus.
- Children as young as five show a significant reduction in the symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder when they are engaged in outdoor activities in natural settings.

Third, OEE **educates for character**: this includes the *ongoing development of personal traits* such as those listed here: (Compassion, Confidence, Modesty, Adaptability, Responsibility).

Educating for character also includes the *development of social skills* such as those listed on this slide: (Trusting others, Effective communication, Decision making, Leadership skills).

Finally, and in the Research Summary authors' opinion most importantly, OEE **educates for environment**. One simply cannot become ecologically literate without direct, sequenced, repeated and informed contact with her or his natural surroundings. At a time when we are

spending more and more time indoors, it is school board provided experiences specifically funded by our provincial government that will ensure these essential experiences for our future citizens.

I will close this presentation with this last slide: in order to think in the global terms demanded of our modern times, we must experience and learn to act locally. It is through these close-up and hands-on experiences with our natural surroundings that we find both the desire and the know-how to ensure a healthy and sustainable future for all life on this planet. It is, as internationally known Canadian ethicist Margaret Somerville suggests, a moral imperative for us to provide these experiences for our children.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

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Co-author, *Reconnecting Children Through Outdoor Education: A Research Summary*

Accompanying Documents

- Executive Summary of *Connecting With Children Through Outdoor Education*
- *Prominent Canadians Voice Their Support for Outdoor & Experiential Education* (Robert Bateman; Thomas Homer-Dixon; Margaret Somerville; David Suzuki)
- *Globe & Mail Op-Ed piece, September 5, 2006*

To be Distributed at Budget Meeting

- *Reconnecting Children Through Outdoor Education: A Research Summary* (80 page document)

Other Recommended Resources

- COEO's web site, www.coeo.org
- In particular, go to www.coeo.org/publication.htm and download Vol. 14 Number 1 of the *Pathways* journal. This issue is built around the theme "Voices from Outside our Profession: Why Outdoor Education Really Matters." Contributors recall the impact of childhood experiences in outdoor education (often at outdoor education centres). Authors are from all over the country, as well as from a variety of public and private sector professions. They include the Speaker of the House of Commons; the Chairman and CEO of Alliance Atlantis; the Chief Technology Officer of Genesis Microchip, a large Canadian high-tech company; a Senior Policy Advisor for Environment Canada; the Territorial Archaeologist of the NWT; a consulting lawyer for the Alberta energy sector.