

Section I - Items for Board of Directors Action

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Directors
Friday, October 25, 2024 Meeting

FROM: Darryl Gray, Director, Education and Training

**RE: ENDORSEMENT OF THE NATURAL SCIENCE AND
EDUCATION COMMITTEE ADVOCACY PROGRAM AND
OUTREACH MATERIALS**

KEY ISSUE

Seeking Toronto and Region Conservation Authority's (TRCA) Board of Directors endorsement of an Advocacy Program designed to raise awareness of the need for improved funding and access for out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment.

RECOMMENDATION:

WHEREAS the Natural Science and Education Committee (NSEC), as an advisory committee of TRCA's Board of Directors comprised of school board trustees and members of TRCA's Board of Directors, has a mandate to study and make recommendations related to the long-term provision of out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment;

AND WHEREAS at Meeting #2/24 held on September 23, 2024 NSEC endorsed an advocacy agenda seeking an increase to \$80M in annual Ministry of Education budget allocation to enable student access to out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment, including \$32M for students of boards of education in Toronto, York, Durham and Peel;

THEREFORE LET IT BE RESOLVED THAT the advocacy program seeking equitable, sustained Ministry of Education funding for student access to out-of-classroom learning system related to natural science, conservation and the environment be endorsed;

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AND FURTHER THAT TRCA and NSEC Members continue to work with the Government of Ontario, including Ministries of Education, Environment, Conservation and Parks, and Natural Resources, area Boards of Trustees, Conservation Ontario and other key stakeholders to advocate for, and realize, appropriate funding for student access to out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment.

BACKGROUND

At Meeting #6/18 on July 20, 2018, TRCA Board of Directors approved the establishment of an Outdoor Education Task Force (Task Force) with an eighteen (18) month mandate to study, develop, and recommend strategic future directions related to out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation, and the environment in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), specifically including Peel, York and Durham Regions and the City of Toronto.

Comprised of School Board Trustees and TRCA Board Members, the Task Force brought forward a series of recommendations intended to strengthen the overall out-of-classroom learning system. At Meeting #2/21 held on February 26, 2021, TRCA's Board of Directors endorsed the Final Report and Recommendations of the Task Force,

Recommendation #1: Establish Shared Governance Model – Natural Science and Education Committee as a Subcommittee of Toronto and Region Conservation Authority's Board of Directors

Recommendation #2: Establish Consistent Access and Curricular Standards Across TRCA and School Boards

Recommendation #3: Establish a Unified Performance Measurement System

Recommendation #4: Advance Shared-Ownership and Access Models That Enhance and Sustain an Overall Out-Of-Classroom Learning System

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Recommendation #5: Develop a Long-Term Equitable Access Financial Plan

Central to the Task Force recommendations was the establishment of the NSEC as a standing committee of TRCA's Board of Directors to provide a shared governance framework that advances the recommendations of the Task Force. TRCA has historically brought key stakeholders together as necessary for important discussions related to the segment of the formal education system that relates to natural science, conservation, and the environment, most recently through the Task Force. The convening of NSEC was seen as an essential component of TRCA's work as a leader in this field by members of the Task Force.

At Meeting #3/22 held on June 6, 2022, NSEC endorsed a series of minimum standards for student access to out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment. These minimum standards are intended to form the basis for a cohesive sequential framework for student access to out-of-classroom learning experiences in nature. Subsequently, at Meeting #2/23 held on October 11, 2023, NSEC further received a staff update on the costing model for implementation of the aforesaid minimum standards and endorsed the following resolutions:

THEREFORE LET IT BE RESOLVED THAT the information report on costing for implementation of minimum standards for access to out-of-classroom learning be received;

THAT TRCA prepare, in consultation with participating school boards, appropriate material to support enhanced advocacy efforts related to long-term funding for out-of-classroom learning in the areas of natural science, conservation and the environment;

AND FURTHER THAT Members of the Natural Science and Education Committee continue to advocate for sustained and ongoing funding for out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation, and the environment.

In order to sustain and ensure the future provision of out-of-classroom learning for students related to natural science, conservation and the environment, the Task Force recognized the importance of stable, long-

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term funding. This was emphasized in the Final Report of the Task Force, specifically in Recommendation #5: Develop a Long-Term Equitable Access Financial Plan.

A key activity of the workplan for NSEC has been to develop a costing of the implementation of the Minimum Standards for Student Access, as endorsed at Meeting #3/22 held on June 6, 2022. The following is a budget framework for each grade covered under the Minimum Standards:

GTA PROGRAM	Grade 2	Grade 4	Grade 7	Grade 9	Totals
Number of Students	55,020	58,330	59,040	62,160	234,550
Estimated Cost per Student w/ Busing	\$ 60.00	\$ 60.00	\$ 350.00	\$ 75.00	
Total Student Contribution	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
Ministry Allocation (GTA Only)	\$ 3,301,200	\$ 3,499,800	\$ 20,664,000	\$ 4,662,000	\$ 32,127,000

Based on enrolment numbers in each of the target grades of participating school boards, and estimated budget costs to deliver day and overnight visits, to implement the Minimum Standards for Student Access across the GTA, providing learning experiences for 234,550 students a year, would require a budget allocation of approximately \$32.1 million. This would translate into an investment of \$545 per student over their learning career for the purposes of, as per the Ministry of Education's Funding Technical Paper 2023-24, "providing meaningful and engaging opportunities and supporting students' education and career/life planning".

Recognizing that all students and schools in Ontario would benefit from improved access to out-of-classroom learning in this area, a high-level budget based on GTA values has been prepared to provide estimated costs to scale the Minimum Standards across the Province. Recognizing that variables exist in busing, delivery and other costs, based on GTA numbers, a provincial program that ensures that all students in Grades 2, 4, 7 and 9 have access to out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment would require an investment through the Ministry of Education of approximately \$79.7M.

ONTARIO PROGRAM	Grade 2	Grade 4	Grade 7	Grade 9	Totals
Number of Students	139,000	143,000	147,000	152,000	581,000
Estimated Cost per Student w/ Busing	\$ 60.00	\$ 60.00	\$ 350.00	\$ 75.00	
Cost per Grade	\$ 8,340,000	\$ 8,580,000	\$ 51,450,000	\$ 11,400,000	\$ 79,770,000
Ministry Allocation	\$ 8,340,000	\$ 8,580,000	\$ 51,450,000	\$ 11,400,000	\$ 79,770,000

RATIONALE

In order to realize the strategic and shared goals of NSEC specific to ensuring equitable access to out-of-classroom learning for students related to natural science, conservation and the environment, advocacy efforts are required. The enclosed advocacy agenda is intended to be used by school board officials and TRCA to raise awareness of both the gaps and opportunities to strengthen the overall system of out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment.

In order to focus efforts related to advocacy, key messages have been developed that will support Trustees, TRCA Board Members and others working in this regard. The advocacy program is intended to highlight key messages in support of shared goals of area school boards and TRCA and was endorsed by NSEC at Meeting #2/24 held on September 23, 2024.

The following are the key messages and outcomes of NSEC'S Advocacy Program:

Main and Sub-Messages:

Main Message:

Students in a highly urbanized Greater Toronto Area, and other urbanized areas of Ontario, experience significant inequity as it relates to both learning in, for and about nature, as well as regular access to nature.

Sub-Message 1:

Student experiences in nature improve learning outcomes related to natural science, conservation and the environment, as well as providing mental health and wellness benefits.

Sub-Message 2:

An investment in nature-based out-of-classroom student learning is an investment in the future appreciation and conservation of the unique and unparalleled natural resources of Ontario.

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Outcomes:

Recognition within Ministry of Education Policy that every student in Grades 2, 4, 7 and 9 is to receive out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment.

Benefit 581,000 students across Ontario through the allocation of \$79M (\$32M for Toronto and Region Boards) in annual funding for students in Grades 2, 4, 7 and 9 to access out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment (colloquially known as outdoor education experiences).

Dramatically improved out-of-classroom learning opportunities for students in the Province, including improved learning outcomes in target curriculum areas related to natural science, conservation and the environment.

The above Messages and Outcomes inform the enclosed Advocacy Agenda, which as noted previously, is intended for use by Trustees, TRCA Board Members and other key allies in raising awareness of the importance of sustained, directed funding for out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment.

Relationship to TRCA's 2023-2034 Strategic Plan

This report supports the following Pillars and Outcomes set forth in TRCA's 2023-2034 Strategic Plan:

Pillar 2 Knowledge Economy:

2.3 Advocacy and adaptability in the face of policy pressures

Pillar 3 Community Prosperity:

3.1 Connect communities to nature and greenspace

Pillar 3 Community Prosperity:

3.3 Informed citizens are conservation champions

Pillar 3 Community Prosperity:

3.4 Inspired communities take environmental action

FINANCIAL DETAILS

There are currently no financial implications or costs associated with this report. As additional advocacy materials and campaigns are developed further costs may be incurred or resources required. These will be funded through TRCA's Education and Training Operating Budget.

DETAILS OF WORK TO BE DONE

Pending approval by TRCA's Board of Directors, TRCA staff will work with the Natural Science and Education Committee, including Trustee and TRCA Board Members, to undertake advocacy efforts as outlined, including targeted outreach initiatives with the Minister of Education and other key Ministry and sector stakeholders. Regular reporting of progress will be provided to TRCA's Board of Directors and NSEC.

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Attachments: 1

Attachment 1: Advocacy Agenda – Natural Science and Education Committee Minimum Standards Funding