

### Items for the Information of the Outdoor Education Task Force

**TO:** Chair and Members of the Outdoor Education Task Force  
Meeting #03/20, Monday, October 19, 2020

**FROM:** Darryl Gray, Director, Education and Training

**RE:** **UPDATE ON COVID-19 OUT-OF-CLASSROOM LEARNING AT TORONTO  
AND REGION CONSERVATION AUTHORITY**

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#### KEY ISSUE

Update on COVID-19 impacts and activities as it pertains to provision of out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment delivered to area schools by Toronto and Region Conservation Authority.

#### RECOMMENDATION

**WHEREAS** Toronto and Region Conservation Authority provides both in-school and out-of-classroom learning experiences related to natural science, conservation and the environment;

**WHEREAS** as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic, in-school visits and out-of-classroom field trips have been cancelled;

**AND WHEREAS** Toronto and Region Conservation Authority continues to adapt programs and services for local schools to respond to the ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic;

**THEREFORE, LET IT BE RESOLVED THAT** the following report be received for the information of the Outdoor Education Task Force;

#### BACKGROUND

With the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic and Provincially declared emergency, TRCA facilities, programs and events were either closed or cancelled. Continued restrictions have dramatically impacted TRCA's education and community programming.

Following the Stage 2 Re-Opening in Ontario, the Kortright Centre for Conservation and Black Creek Pioneer Village re-opened to the public on August 8, 2020 with safe operating protocols in place, however, TRCA's conservation field centres remain closed, while all in-school programming has been cancelled as restrictions related to access to schools have continued and are anticipated to continue.

To adapt to this uncertainty, since the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic, TRCA has initiated alternative programming and delivery methods as a means of adapting business operations to the changing circumstances while continuing to stay relevant. This includes inviting participants to take part in TRCA's *#AtHomeWithNature* and *#VillageAtHome* series on Facebook, along with several other home-based family activities, live interactive workshops, learning modules for students, and online exhibits.

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To respond to the educational needs of local students, TRCA continues to develop resources and live learning experiences for classes that provide curriculum-linked lessons related to natural science, conservation and the environment. In order to better understand opportunities to intersect with vastly different learning environments, TRCA continues to work with area school boards and staff to determine how best to support students learning needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In September 2020 TRCA staff convened a professional development exchange with four of the eight school boards located in TRCA's jurisdiction (TCDSB, DDSB, PDSB, YRDSB) with the purpose of gaining a better understanding how TRCA can support teachers, students, and school boards in the GTA during the current global pandemic. Key learnings from these conversations are outlined below:

- Logistically, similar models are being used across all school boards for the 2020-2021 school year and includes in-person school and as well as online school.
  - Elementary – Either online or in-person learning. Students are cohorted with their class and teacher and there is limited rotary/movement from classroom. Breaks are staggered in some instances.
  - Secondary – Blend of online and in school learning. Using the quadmester model with A and B cohorts.
  - No club, teams or out of class experiences permitted currently.
- Non-essential visitors and volunteers are not permitted at any of the school boards therefor all external programming with schools must be online or virtual.
- Higher online enrollment has been experienced in regions with elevated COVID positive numbers.
- Some school boards have reduced class sizes in areas with higher COVID positive numbers by using gymnasiums and other areas of the school to facilitate social distancing.
- To facilitate student movement between in-person and online school, school boards have indicated that they have either prepared or may consider preparing a set schedule for curriculum delivery for the academic year.
- The main platforms being used by school boards for online learning are Google Classroom (Google Meetup for live online sessions) and D2L. Zoom is also being used for live online sessions by some school boards.
- External organizations may provide presentations and programming to students and teachers, however, it must be virtual. The host of these programs will vary depending on the school board – some school boards will allow an external provider to host the online program while it must be hosted through the teacher within other school boards. Teacher presence is required for live online synchronous learning with students.
- School boards are focusing on outdoor learning and getting their students outside as much as possible. Incorporation of indigenous pedagogy into outdoor learning and anti-

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black racism and anti-oppressive training for teachers is also an area of focus for some boards.

- School boards with outdoor education staff have shifted their focus to community-based programming and supporting teachers on outdoor learning. One school board is doing this virtually and has assigned each educator to a family of schools (or multiple families of schools) while another school board is posting their outdoor education staff at schools.
- The demand is high for safe outdoor learning environments. Access to community can be a challenge. Some schools are accessing adjacent park spaces and allowing community walks.

Based on this discussion, there are a number of ways that TRCA can offer support to school board partners:

- Provide professional development and learning opportunities and/or resources to support teachers in how to use and/or connect the natural environment to both virtual and in-person learning settings. These can be live online sessions or pre-recorded videos, resources, activity packages, etc. One board suggested providing a designated 'bookable' outdoor educator for teachers to go to for assistance and support on connecting their student to natural spaces.
- Provide synchronous or asynchronous curriculum connected learning opportunities for students in all grades.
- Provide virtual SHSM programs and independent co-op opportunities for secondary students.
- Support getting students outside into the community and local outdoor learning environments through the provision of greenspace mapping around schools and the assessment of outdoor greenspaces near schools for safety concerns and learning opportunities.
- Identify and provide resources to support teachers in finding creative and hands-on ways to use the new math curriculum.

### **RATIONALE**

On an annual basis, TRCA provides approximately 155,000 learning experiences for students and classes from schools in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). These experiences are delivered either through TRCA's in-school education services (eg. Watershed on Wheels and Aquatic Plants Program), or in one of TRCA's education centres or conservation areas. With the current COVID-19 global pandemic, both in-school and out-of-class learning experiences have been cancelled.

While the timeline for restart of out-of-classroom education programming is not known at this time, building on the information noted above, staff are developing opportunities to leverage TRCA's resources, including curriculum, teaching expertise and education facilities that will engage students from area schools and school boards in learning related to natural-science, conservation and the environment. These offerings include:

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- Live Synchronous Field Trips
- Live Synchronous Webinars
- Curriculum-Linked Resources and Learning Supports

The curricular goals of these programs are to continue to provide safe, effective learning experiences during the global pandemic while maintaining important relationships with local schools, teachers and administrators. Additionally, the ability to develop and deliver online learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment is complementary to the overall objectives of TRCA and the Outdoor Education Task Force as it provides the ability to enhance and leverage out-of-classroom learning by integrating online curriculum with experiences in nature. As a key element of curriculum-renewal, on an ongoing basis, TRCA has developed and delivered integrated learning experiences that scaffold multiple educational experiences into unified learning units, thereby expanding the opportunity to improve student literacy related to natural science, conservation and the environment.

While some program offerings will be provided on a fee-for-service basis, as with normal education offerings, TRCA has a range of opportunities for schools to access learning experiences both at a subsidized and non-subsidized cost.

### **Relationship to Building the Living City, the TRCA 2013-2022 Strategic Plan**

This report supports the following strategies set forth in the TRCA 2013-2022 Strategic Plan:

**Strategy 3 – Rethink greenspace to maximize its value**

**Strategy 5 – Foster sustainable citizenship**

### **DETAILS OF WORK TO BE DONE**

Staff are currently working with local schools and school boards to develop and offer these new educational offerings as an interim measure until out-of-classroom learning experiences are able to resume and will provide an update report at the November, 2020 Outdoor Education Task Force meeting.

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