

Section I – Items for Board of Directors Action

TO: Chair and Members of the Board of Directors
Friday, February 26, 2021 Meeting

FROM: Darryl Gray, Director, Education and Training

RE: **OUTDOOR EDUCATION TASK FORCE FINAL REPORT**
Strategic Vision Statement and Recommendations of the Outdoor Education
Task Force

KEY ISSUE

The Outdoor Education Task Force has completed its eighteen (18) month term and has prepared for submission the Strategic Vision Statement and Recommendations as per the Terms of Reference. Board of Directors approval and endorsement of the Outdoor Education Task Force Strategic Vision Statement and Recommendations.

RECOMMENDATION

WHEREAS at its Meeting #6/18 held on July 20, 2018, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority Board of Directors approved the establishment of an Outdoor Education Task Force comprised of elected officials from local school boards and TRCA's Board of Directors;

AND WHEREAS the Outdoor Education Task Force has been convened to study, develop and recommend strategic future directions related to natural science, conservation and environmental out-of-classroom learning in the Toronto region;

AND WHEREAS at Meeting #5/20 held on January 25, 2020, the Outdoor Education Task Force endorsed the final report, Vision Statement and Strategic Recommendations, as amended, for submission to Toronto and Region Conservation Authority Board of Directors;

THEREFORE, LET IT BE RESOLVED THAT the final report of the Outdoor Education Task Force be received;

THAT the Vision Statement, as amended at the January 25, 2021 Outdoor Education Task Force meeting, be endorsed;

THAT the following recommendations of the Outdoor Education Task Force be approved for action:

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

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

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

THAT the approved Vision Statement and Strategic Recommendations be circulated to area Boards of Trustees for consideration and endorsement;

AND FURTHER THAT TRCA staff be requested to present to participating Boards of Trustees, the Province of Ontario and other stakeholders, organizations or community partners the final Vision Statement and Strategic Recommendations of the Outdoor Education Task Force.

BACKGROUND

The Outdoor Education Task Force (OETF) was established at Meeting #6/18 on July 20, 2018 by Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) Board of Directors 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.

The OETF is comprised of Trustees appointed from area school boards and members of TRCA's Board of Directors, including the following:

- *Durham Catholic District School Board: Trustee Morgan Ste. Marie*
- *York Region District School Board: Trustee Cynthia Cordova*
- *York Catholic District School Board: Trustee Jennifer Wigston*
- *Peel District School Board: Trustee Will Davies*
- *Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board: Trustee Frank Di Cosola*
- *Toronto District School Board: Trustee Anu Sriskandarajah*
- *Toronto Catholic District School Board: Trustee Garry Tanuan*
- *Conseil scolaire catholique MonAvenir: Chair Melinda Chartrand*
- *TRCA (City of Brampton): Regional Councillor Rowena Santos*
- *TRCA (City of Toronto): Basu Mukherjee*

At OETF Meeting #1/19 held on October 17, 2019, the OETF approved a workplan that included the following:

- Develop a framework for the long-term provision of out-of-classroom learning experiences related to natural science, conservation and the environment that meets the needs of the student population to the year 2040;
- Provide recommendations to strengthen and enable partnerships and collaboration between public sector agencies that maximize the use and value of public assets and infrastructure;
- Provide expertise and recommendations on strengthening experiential connections between the urban and natural environments, with consideration for the impact of urban intensification on student access to greenspace and natural systems;
- Provide recommendations related to long-term financial sustainability, including, but not limited to:
 - Government funding programs;

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- Private grants, fundraising and endowments;
- Alternative business models (co-operatives, social enterprises, etc.);
- Other funding models.

During its term, the OETF met six (6) times, participating in three (3) facilitated workshops facilitated by I-THINK and was informed by ongoing research and information provided by TRCA staff, staff from participating school boards and OETF members. The three facilitated workshops focused on specific areas of strategic priority and provided an opportunity for OETF members to discuss emerging trends, data, student and school needs as well as overall opportunities for the out-of-classroom learning system. The facilitated workshops included:

- Workshop 1: Values and Destination Visioning
- Workshop 2: Models and Mechanisms
- Workshop 3: Recommendations, Framework and Policy Statements

Through the work of the OETF, the following themes emerged, which formed the basis for the Vision Statement (**Attachment 1**) and the Recommendations.

1. TRCA plays an integral role in providing leadership to the out-of-classroom learning system as it relates to natural science, conservation and the environment;
2. The student voice should be at the forefront of decision making, ensuring inclusion and equitable access;
3. Achieving success in reimagining the out-of-classroom learning system is predicated on collaborative action, with TRCA seen as fulfilling the role of convenor in bringing together the range of stakeholders necessary to establish a supportive infrastructure of learning as well as perform a secretariat function;
4. Establishing performance measures and standards for the delivery of out-of-classroom learning is essential, including curricular expectations and indicators of success, as well as instituting foundational principles of equitable access and inclusion;
5. Improved student and community learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment requires multiple interventions, multiple entry points, and multiple pathways, including participating in out-of-classroom experiences such as field trips but also integration of all aspects of student life – in school, out-of-school, and in the home – to change knowledge, attitudes and behaviour.

At Meeting #5/20 held on January 25, 2021 and conducted via video conference, the Outdoor Education Task Force endorsed amended RES.#OETF17/20 that follows in part:

THEREFORE, LET IT BE RESOLVED THAT the Vision Statement be endorsed, as amended at the January 25, 2021 Outdoor Education Task Force meeting;

THAT the following recommendations of the Outdoor Education Task Force be approved, as amended, for submission to Toronto and Region Conservation Authority Board of Directors:

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

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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

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

THAT the approved Vision Statement and Strategic Recommendations be circulated to area Boards of Trustees for consideration and endorsement;

THAT TRCA staff be requested to present to participating Boards of Trustees, the Province of Ontario and other stakeholders, organizations or community partners the final Vision Statement and Strategic Recommendations of the Outdoor Education Task Force;

AND FURTHER THAT the final report of the Outdoor Education Task Force be submitted to TRCA's Board of Directors for recommended adoption and action as necessary.

The Vision Statement itself was the result of a series of collaborative workshops facilitated by IThink and provides a unifying commitment to advance the development of a renewed out-of-classroom learning system that supports improved access to educational experiences related to natural science, conservation and the environment. The enclosed Vision Statement represents a collective aspirational goal to help guide collaboration amongst TRCA and area school boards to advance our shared objectives related to out-of-classroom learning.

The Vision Statement, as developed and endorsed by the OETF, is as follows:

We envision a future where:

The students of Ontario have consistent access to quality outdoor education.

Educators have the confidence and self-efficacy to make environmental stewardship a pillar of their classroom pedagogy.

Trustees, in partnership with parents and guardians, and in cooperation with TRCA, advocate for system change in how funds are allocated for outdoor education. Advocacy is targeted towards an ecosystem of funders, like the Ontario Ministry of Education, school boards, organizations like the OPSBA, OSTA-AECO, OCSTA, AFOCSC, and industry, with the goal of consistent funding to support long-term planning and a breadth of actions that will ensure flexibility for classrooms and whole boards in their delivery of outdoor education.

Community comes together to create a system of support ensuring impactful out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment.

Environmental stewardship is rooted in a global, interconnected understanding that is introspective: building an appreciation for Indigenous knowledge and communities, and understanding the role of colonialism on our understanding, behaviours and relationship

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with the land, and nurturing the global competencies to develop solutions to local, global, and intercultural issues related to environmental sustainability.

Generations of environmental stewards are fostered, sparked, nourished and sustained with outdoor education experiences; contributing to a citizenry with a life-long appreciation for nature and land, and the agencies required to take actions to ensure a viable future for ourselves and the environment.

Along with the realization of the above vision, it was recognized that for a successful reimagining of out-of-classroom experiences and the system necessary to support it, no single organization can, *or should*, assume full responsibility for its management, rather collaborative action amongst all public agencies, including school boards, conservation authorities and the Province of Ontario, as well as other agencies and organizations, is *required* to build a renewed system that supports student learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment. This acknowledgement of *required collaboration* forms the backbone of the following recommended elements of an Out-of-Classroom Learning Framework.

RATIONALE

Given the above Vision Statement, based on input from, and discussions with, the OETF and stakeholders, and ongoing research on best practices, TRCA staff prepared and circulated detailed recommended actions for endorsement by the OETF. These recommendations form the basis for future action and operationalization of the Vision Statement to advance shared goals and objectives related to improve out-of-classroom learning opportunities. Elemental to these recommendations is the recognition that even stronger and more formalized collaboration amongst public agencies, such as school boards, conservation authorities and multiple Ministries at the Province of Ontario, is required. The strong collaboration amongst the OETF has provided a basis from which to further build and strengthen these partnerships.

The following detailed recommendations were endorsed by the OETF at Meeting #5/20 held on January 25, 2021:

Recommendation #1: Establish Shared Governance Model – Natural Science and Education Committee as a Sub-Committee of TRCA Board of Directors

The OETF has highlighted the important role of shared governance in building a collaborative system that integrates collective decision-making and mutual accountability into the overall supporting infrastructure of out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment. To this end, it is recommended that a standing committee of TRCA's Board of Directors be established with members appointed from area school boards, TRCA, the Ministry of Education and other leading science-based and education organizations, including post-secondary institutions and government agencies, such as Parks Canada (Rouge National Urban Park) and Toronto Zoo, where appropriate.

The role of the *Natural Science and Education Committee* is proposed to provide oversight and leadership to the system that supports out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment within school boards, conservation authorities and other key stakeholders. The primary focus of Natural Science and Education Committee would be to support the operationalization of the recommendations and framework emanating from the OETF, while strengthening the overall connection between the science of conservation and environmental management and the formal and non-formal education systems.

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Consideration should be given to integrating the youth voice into the Natural Science and Education Committee, including a clarifying definition of “youth”. Options may include:

- Student Trustee appointment(s)
- Appointment of representative(s) from TRCA’s Youth Council
- General call for applications for appointment

With approval of this recommendation, TRCA staff are prepared to develop a draft, detailed *Terms of Reference* for the Natural Science and Education Committee for consideration by TRCA’s Board of Directors.

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

An early discussion point of the OETF was the recognition of inconsistency across school boards in the ability and capacity to deliver, or access, out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment for students that meet curricular expectations. It was also identified that principles of inclusion and equity of access were integral to the strengthening of the out-of-classroom learning system and programs. To this end, it is recommended that standards be established that provide for a minimum base for out-of-classroom learning experiences related to natural science, conservation and the environment for students, and that these essential experiences be curriculum-linked via a scope and sequence and reflect the OETF expectations related to equitable inclusion and student-centred perspectives.

Several boards have adopted policies for access to out-of-classroom learning experiences based on curriculum and grade, which serves as a starting point for the development of overall standards. For example, YRDSB enables through policy the provision of outdoor education experiences for grades 2, 4 and 7 at YRDSB operated day centres. Within the scope of the Natural Science and Education Committee, a key activity will be to build on existing supportive policies and provide recommendations on a set of standards for the Greater Toronto Area that foster the framework for a multi-stakeholder approach to policy development for student access to out-of-classroom learning with sufficient flexibility to allow unique school board approaches to be in place. To this end, while providing general oversight and support for the continued advancement and monitoring of standards and policies from a curricular and equitable access perspective, the Natural Science and Education Committee will function as a convener of organizations to support continued policy development that meets the needs of local school boards within the broader system.

Additionally, OETF members acknowledged the importance of harmonizing policy and risk management practices to both ensure the overall safety of students accessing out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment, as well as facilitating the ease of access for these experiences. Recognizing the diverse range of policies and procedures within school boards, it is recommended that further exploration be given to adopting existing standards or developing new uniform standards, to ensure consistency, accountability and transparency in the overall risk management and excursion approval framework.

Recommendation #3: Establish a Unified Performance Measurement System

Given the transformative nature of the recommendations related to the Outdoor Education Task Force, performance measurement is central to monitoring and reporting on progress relative to the broader framework supporting out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment. Additionally, while there is an abundance of support for the

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benefits of outdoor education, there is limited empirical data as it pertains to the efficacy of outdoor education in the broadest sense, and more specifically, out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment. For this reason, it is recommended that multiple streams of performance measures (quantitative and qualitative) be established for regular reporting, trend tracking and planning for participating agencies through the proposed Natural Science and Education Committee via TRCA's Board of Directors. Measures and streams may include:

- General function and performance of out-of-classroom learning system, including the following potential sub-streams:
 - Total number of students participating in out-of-classroom learning experiences
 - Total number of learner hours of students participating in out-of-classroom experiences
 - Distribution of out-of-classroom learning experiences by students by school board based on student population
 - Total number of agreements established for the shared provision of out-of-classroom learning experiences, including for both facility-based use and local greenspace access
- Curricular and learning outcomes measurement:
 - Assessment and reporting of environmental knowledge
- Financial performance and investment levels:
 - Provincial funding allocation by student by school boards
 - Additional funding by student by school boards
 - Funding by student by agencies, including conservation authorities
 - Leveraged, or non-school/non-student, revenue as a percentage of total operating budget, by facility and at an aggregate level
- Longitudinal studies on the impact of experiences within school years as well as post-graduation
- Perception of personal and community health and wellness as it relates to experiences in out-of-classroom learning

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

To realize Recommendation #2 related to standards for access, a fundamental re-imagining of the overall ownership and administration of out-of-classroom learning is required. Historic models of board-owned assets being utilized exclusively by students from one particular school board should be adapted to reflect current and more recent practices related to shared use and shared access of schools and community facilities. Additionally, stronger linkages between local schools and local greenspace systems for curated or facilitated and teacher-led, out-of-classroom learning experiences will require improved integration between schools, school boards, conservation authorities and local municipalities. It is recommended that multi-partite agreements between area school boards, conservation authorities, partner agencies and municipalities be established that view the system as a whole, rather than as discrete parts, enabling improved and optimized use of both local education centres and greenspace systems.

Under S.197 of the *Education Act* (RSO 1990), school boards are enabled to enter into agreements with conservation authorities for the use of lands, buildings, and personnel for the purposes of providing natural science, conservation, or other out-of-classroom programs. Additionally, S.197 also contains provisions for two or more school boards to enter in to agreements for the shared use and delivery of natural science programs and other out-of-

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classroom learning programs. It is through this legislation that the current system of natural science schools, outdoor education centres, environmental education centres and conservation field centres that facilitate student out-of-classroom learning has developed, and from which future agreements for the continued and expanded delivery of out-of-classroom learning experiences will emanate. This legislation provides the framework for shared ownership and shared delivery models that leverage the value of public assets, including buildings, personnel, and greenspace.

TRCA and local school boards have a strong history of shared use of facilities and greenspace for out-of-classroom learning experiences related to natural science, conservation and the environment specifically, as well as community use of assets and resources, such as schools, facilities and services, through multi-partite agreements. This shared history forms the foundation for a renewed approach to collaboration that optimizes use of public assets, including education centres, personnel and local greenspace, in a way that is centred on the student experience.

Taking an approach that allows for shared ownership or administrative models provides for balanced, equitable access across school boards, while improving the financial sustainability of the overall system. Further to this, TRCA, along with school boards and other partners, have excellent experience leveraging the value of existing facilities to create multi-use assets that improve overall use and performance of facilities, both programmatically and financially, as seen with schools, outdoor education centres and other public spaces. This experience in creating community hubs should be leveraged in reimagining how outdoor education centres are programmed and sustained into the future.

Examples of TRCA multi-partite agreements that enable out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment include:

- Lake St. George Field Centre: Historically operated by TRCA under a multi-partite agreement with TDSB, TCDSB and YRDSB. (Humber River Watershed, York Region)
- Burlington Outdoor Education Centre: Owned and operated by YRDSB, with an agreement for use of adjacent greenspace owned by TRCA. (Humber River Watershed, York Region)
- Etobicoke Outdoor Education Centre: Owned and operated by TDSB, within TRCA's Albion Hills Conservation Area, adjacent to TRCA's Albion Hills Field Centre, under a 40-year land lease with TRCA. Under the agreement, TRCA also provides food service for TDSB students. (Humber River Watershed, Peel Region)

Examples of school board multi-partite agreements that enable efficient use of space and resources:

- City Place: Umbrella agreement for the creation of two elementary schools (TCDSB and TDSB) with City of Toronto adjacent to Canoe Landing Park and Canoe Landing Recreation Centre.
- Student Transportation Services of York Region: Amalgamated student transportation services for YRDSB and YCDSB. Governed by a separate standing committee of both boards.
- Flato Markham Theatre: Joint use agreement between City of Markham and YRDSB for use of Flato Markham Theatre as part of the Unionville Secondary School/Markham Civic Centre master plan. Includes provision for use of theatre, as well as a cost sharing

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mechanism related to heating and cooling and grounds maintenance.

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

Stable, dedicated funding linked to a cohesive, coordinated plan for the provision of out-of-classroom learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment is critical to achieving the overall vision of the OETF. As per Recommendation #2, equitable and consistent access across all school boards is a key aspect of future collaborative work amongst stakeholder organizations, including school boards and conservation authorities. Furthermore, stable, strategically targeted funding with clear shared objectives pertaining to use will allow optimization of existing public assets, while protecting the current system from further loss of resources, such as closures. Funding for the purposes of supporting a resilient out-of-classroom learning system can be grouped into three categories:

1. Per student funding for out-of-classroom experiences at school board, conservation authority or other learning centres;
2. Capacity-building and professional development for teachers to support improved learning related to natural science, conservation and the environment in local communities;
3. Capital funding to ensure the long-term viability of existing and new learning centres, with a particular emphasis on removing barriers and improving accessibility while advancing goals related to climate change mitigation and green buildings;

For the 2020/2021 school year, the Province of Ontario provided an Outdoor Education Allocation of \$17.7 million to school boards based on the following calculation:

- \$5,000 per school board + (\$8.51 x Average Daily Enrollment)

Based on early research conducted and reported at Outdoor Education Task Force Meeting #1/20 held on January 20, 2020, the use of this allocation is inconsistent, largely as a result of varying policy environments related to outdoor education between school boards, though school boards use the funds for similar purposes, including fees for field trip costs, transportation costs, teacher release time costs, student and teacher safety training for specific disciplines or courses and others. Additionally, several school boards provide top-up funding for certain elements of their outdoor education program, however, this enhanced funding is not consistent across school boards.

As noted in Recommendation #4, the legislative opportunity under the Education Act for establishing mechanisms for the provision of out-of-classroom learning can leverage existing funding levels while streamlining access for students; with a diverse range of providers available for schools to access for learning experiences, a more coordinated approach across the sector would enhance opportunities for students while also ensuring strong value for both the school boards and Province of Ontario in use of public funding. Additionally, by providing standards and a more robust and harmonized policy environment across school boards, as per Recommendation #2, uniform use of the Outdoor Education Allocation by school boards would increase clarity and consistency between and across jurisdictions.

While a base level of funding that supports the strategic delivery of student experiences linked to overall standards is integral to the overall effectiveness of a region-wide approach to out-of-classroom learning, it is important to acknowledge the additional sources of funding that support student experiences, including user fees, community fundraising, school board and conservation authority fundraising and foundations, as well as others. To this end, it is

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recommended that the Natural Science and Education Committee, upon establishment, convene a working group to develop a detailed financial roadmap of existing funding models, including a gap and opportunity analysis for improved and consistent public and private funding to be communicated to TRCA Board of Directors, school boards and the Province of Ontario. Congruent to the roadmap, the working group should undertake an assessment of current cost structures for school board- and conservation authority-operated public learning assets to better understand the overall cost of delivery for the system to better match long-term costs with actual funding.

Conclusion

While Ontario, and more specifically the Greater Toronto Area, has a relatively sophisticated and robust out-of-classroom learning system to support student experiences related to natural science, conservation and the environment, the lack of a cohesive framework for the continued advancement of this segment of the learning system creates a long-term risk. As per the approved Terms of Reference and Workplan for the OETF, the above Vision Statement and Strategic Recommendations provide a framework for the advancement of the overall shared objectives of meeting the current and future out-of-classroom learning needs related to natural-science, conservation and the environment for students to the year 2040.

The work of the OETF as outlined in the terms of reference is now complete, however, ongoing advocacy for the above framework will be required in order to fully realize the above Vision Statement and Strategic Recommendations.

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

Strategy 7 – Build partnerships and new business models

FINANCIAL DETAILS

TRCA's 2020 budget for school-based education programs and activities was \$5.1 million, with \$3.77M (74%) generated through user fees, grants and other revenue and the remaining \$1.33M (26%) supported through municipal funding for special programs, such as Peel EcoSchools, Watershed on Wheels, Water Festivals and others.

The operational costs for administration of the Natural Science and Education Committee is estimated to be \$30,000 per year, primarily funded through operating account 365-01.

DETAILS OF WORK TO BE DONE

Upon endorsement and approval, staff will begin development of a Terms of Reference for the Natural Science and Education Committee. Staff would report back to the Board of Directors on the Terms of Reference for the Natural Science and Education Committee at the June 2021 meeting with a target inaugural meeting taking place in November 2021.

Furthermore, upon endorsement of the Vision Statement and Recommendation, staff will work with Trustee members of the OETF to make arrangements to provide presentations on the work of the OETF, and request adoption by area school boards of the OETF Vision Statement and Recommendations. It is projected that presentations to participating Boards of Trustees would commence in April of 2021 and be complete by September of 2021, pending school board agendas and meeting dates.

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Date: February 2, 2021
Attachments: 1

Attachment 1: Outdoor Education Task Force Vision Statement