

Introduction to Outdoor Education and Land-Based Learning

Waywayseecappo / Parkwest School Division

Welcome and Introduction

Speaker: Colleen Clearsky, Director of Education

"Boozhoo. My name is Colleen Clearsky, and I serve as the Director of Education for the Waywayseecappo / Parkwest School Division. It is an honor to stand before you today to share the vision, heart, and future of our newly established Outdoor Education and Land-Based Program. This initiative is more than just a change in environment; it is a commitment to a holistic way of knowing that honors our history while preparing our children for the future."

A New Beginning: The Pilot Year

This academic year marks the official launch of our pilot initiative. We have intentionally moved beyond the constraints of traditional four-walled classrooms to embrace experiential learning in its purest form. Our journey began with school-wide outdoor activities that saw immediate success, such as ice fishing and snaring. These foundational experiences proved that the land is a powerful motivator; we witnessed a significant increase in student attendance and a surge in parental and Elder involvement.

Crucially, we observed that students who previously struggled to focus in traditional classroom settings began to thrive, enjoying their time at school and attending on a regular basis. In a modern world where excessive screen time has become the norm for children, we are deeply moved to see our students choosing a different path. We are seeing our youth ice fishing, hunting, and preparing food with their friends and families during their evenings and weekends. This program is successfully bridging the gap between school life and home life, fostering a lifestyle rooted in the land.

To transition from those early successes to the comprehensive program we have today, we are incredibly thankful for the grant and proposal funding received from the Department of Indigenous Services Canada. By treating the natural world as our primary learning space, we are fostering a sense of curiosity and resilience in our students that is difficult to replicate indoors.

Curriculum, Truth, and Reconciliation

Our program is deeply integrated into the academic fabric of our division, serving as a direct and meaningful response to the **Calls to Action for Truth and Reconciliation**. We recognize that true reconciliation requires more than just words; it requires a restoration of the relationship between Indigenous youth and the land that was historically disrupted.

By teaching on the land, we meet and exceed provincial standards through a lens of restoration and respect. Whether we are studying biology through local flora, geography through the tracking of waterways, or history through the stories of our ancestors, we are centering Indigenous knowledge systems. This approach validates our students' worldviews and ensures that their education is both culturally relevant and academically rigorous.

Language and Culture

The land is, and always has been, our first teacher. It is the place where our language is most alive and where our stories find their context. By immersing students in the outdoors, we provide a natural sanctuary for the practice of our culture and the revitalization of our linguistic fluency.

In this program, language is not learned through rote memorization but through action—naming the plants, describing the weather, and offering thanks in our traditional tongue. This immersive environment ensures that our heritage is not a relic of the past, but a vibrant, breathing part of our students' daily identities. We are planting the seeds of cultural pride that will stay with them long after they graduate.

The Role of Our Elders: The Heart of the Program

Most importantly, our program is guided and sanctified by the **Elders of our community**. They are the keepers of sacred knowledge, the bridge to our collective history, and our most respected mentors. Without their presence, this program would simply be "outdoor education"; with them, it becomes "land-based learning."

The success of this initiative relies on their wisdom and their willingness to share the "old ways" with a new generation. Their involvement ensures that:

- **Traditional Protocols:** Students learn the importance of offerings, the ethics of harvesting, and the proper way to walk upon the Earth with humility.
- **Intergenerational Bonds:** We are closing the gap between youth and seniors, fostering a community of mutual respect and shared storytelling.
- **Holistic Guidance:** Elders provide a unique form of mentorship that nurtures the spirit and the mind simultaneously, teaching students that their emotional and spiritual well-being is just as important as their academic success.

Closing Thought:

"We are walking this path together—students, educators, and Elders—to ensure that our children grow up with deep roots in their identity and the modern skills necessary to thrive in an ever-changing world. Through the land, we find our way back to ourselves."