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The value of outdoor education

Instead of closing the Frost centre, the Liberals should include it in curriculums as a teaching tool, *by Grant Linney*

It is unfortunate that the Ontario government has closed the Leslie M. Frost Natural Resources Centre in the Haliburton Highlands, and that it has done so in such a hasty and non-consultative way.

It is also sad that this government has dismissed as "fondness" the widespread expressions of support for this program and site. Fondness implies that outdoor education is a frill; it's nice to have in times of plenty, but not essential when the going gets tough.

Given that the closure of the Frost centre is one more step in a long sequence of cutbacks to outdoor education over the past 15 years, it is apparent that educators have not done a good job promoting the many meaningful and lasting outcomes that outdoor education brings about.

When a group of students participates in a stream study, something powerful happens.

Observe their body language as they scoop long-handled nets through flowing waters to catch aquatic life. Watch their eyes as they intently search through plant and stream bottom material and exclaim, "Look!! There's something! Look! It's so perfectly camouflaged, but now it's moving! It's got six legs and three body parts; it must be an insect. Wow! Look at how it clings upside down to this rock."

When you watch a child participating in a stream study, or any number of other outdoor and environmental education activities, you witness engagement and connection.

You witness a child's encounter with the reality and complexity of natural systems, an encounter that activates curiosity and, with teacher guidance, calls upon critical thinking skills in order to understand how the whole is both dependent upon and greater than the sum of its parts.

"What is this creature? How is it adapted to life in this ecosystem? Look at how it's now doing push-ups in the still water of our collecting tray in order to get the oxygen it normally acquires from a moving current.

"What does its presence tell us about the quality of this stream? What is our impact upon, and responsibility for, the health of this stream?"

You witness the beginnings of an environmental literacy that will actively support progressive initiatives such as those recently announced by the Ontario Liberals: becoming more of a conserver society; developing and using more public transit; protecting urban greenbelts and our freshwater resources.

This example, then, illustrates two of the great and lasting benefits of outdoor education: education for both environment and curriculum.

When you watch a child go snowshoeing or cross-country skiing for the first time, when you see her learning to successfully use map and compass in order to complete a cross-country orienteering course, when you have him create watercolour interpretations of his natural surroundings using only materials found there, when you have them look and listen for bird life in meadows and forests, you once again witness what for many will become lasting, sustainable and personally fulfilling connections with their environment.

Outdoor education now becomes education for wellness, be it physical, emotional, or spiritual.

When you watch a group successfully traverse a long cable that is suspended half a metre above the ground, you witness interpersonal skills in action.

And, when you watch a young person climb to the top of a 10-metre hydro pole, stand on top of it and then leap for a trapeze-like swing, you again see this intensity and engagement, and you witness the development of personal traits such as confidence, empathy, a sense of responsibility, and a willingness to take risks.

This, then, embraces a fourth benefit of outdoor education, and one that Premier Dalton McGuinty passionately spoke of during the recent election campaign: education for character.

Well-run outdoor education programs create powerful and unforgettable experiences that are transformational.

They empower today's learners to become tomorrow's responsible, productive and fulfilled citizens.

And, this is why I very much hope that our Ontario government will:

★Recognize how outdoor education can provide the experiential spark that will motivate citizens to support and act upon Liberal priorities in education, environment and health.

★Give outdoor education the formal recognition it deserves in Ontario curriculums as a unique and powerful teaching tool.

★Allow school boards the flexibility to fund local initiatives in outdoor education.

★Reopen the Leslie Frost Centre. Renew its mandate as part of a multi-ministry initiative that both values its great and widespread contributions to date and fully aligns it with the Liberals' overarching priorities.

Residential centres are not the only way to have outdoor education experiences, but the Frost centre is an icon in this province, particularly in terms of education for environment, curriculum and wellness. Its strengths remain and the symbolism of its closing is profound.

Grant Linney is president of The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO).

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