

To: Andrew Davis, Assistant Deputy Minister, Education Labour and Finance Division,  
Ministry of Education  
From: Liz Kirk, President, The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO)  
Re: The Importance of Outdoor Experiential Education (OEE) to the Success of *Education That Works For You*  
Date: May 31, 2019

The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO) is the professional body for outdoor educators in Ontario. COEO is a non-profit, volunteer-based organization that promotes the value of outdoor education as a powerful learning methodology for people of all ages. Most of COEO's 400+ members are front-line educators, working directly with students.

### **Summary**

Outdoor Experiential Education (OEE) is a valuable educational investment that pays for itself.

- It will help in achieving the goals in *Education That Works For You*
- It improves youth mental health
- It improves youth resilience to better prepare them for post-secondary education and the world of work
- It promotes lifelong emotional, physical and spiritual well-being that improves both physical and mental health at all ages.

For these reasons, COEO advocates for the following government actions:

1. Acknowledge the value of OEE by preserving current levels of funding, and educational opportunities, for OEE in future school years;
2. Maintain a mix of local and further afield OEE locations
3. Preserve continued development of curriculum-based OEE through appropriately qualified OCTs, with the teaching carried out by both OCTs and instructor specialists.

### **Context**

Outdoor and experiential education can help to strengthen and advance the achievement and goals of the Ontario Government's recently released education plan, *Education That Works For You*. COEO understands GSN funding toward OEE is being mostly maintained for the 2019-2020 school year; we strongly support this move and thank the government for recognizing the value of this specialized type of education. That being said, particularly for future school years, COEO is concerned that, in an environment where school boards are offering students fewer course options, OEE could be among the first programs cut. As we explain further below, such a move would be counter to the goals of *Education that Works For You*, as well as being a net burden on the Province's finances. OEE is an example of value-for-money in the use of government funds, as investments in OEE are more than paid for through savings in, for example, mental health and correctional services expenditures.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Statements made within this submission are based on the findings of two comprehensive research summaries COEO commissioned (one in 2007 and one in 2018). We would be pleased to share further information from these research reports and/or the reports themselves.

*Education That Works For You* looks to modernize both learning and classrooms. This plan has multiple and powerful alignments with three of COEO's pillars of OEE, as described below:

### **Education for Curriculum**

OEE connects curriculum to real-world situations. This real-world application of learning not only better prepares students for the world of work, it is also directly related to creating interest in applied fields, like skilled trades. At the same time, OEE is part of and promotes the development of skills in STEM. Plans to modernize classrooms must include trips to outdoor learning environments. Local destinations enable multiple trips over the course of a school year, while an overnight stay at a more remote outdoor education centre offers a longer, more impactful and immersive experience.

- OEE provides increased engagement and enthusiasm for learning, as well as improved academic performance in a variety of areas including STEM subjects. In 2017, the largest-ever Canadian consultation on the future of STEM education took place, which included participation from over 1000 students from 85 schools. Students expressed interest in personalized learning, student collaboration, experiential learning, self-awareness and wellbeing – all items that are consistently embedded into OEE programs.
- The hands-on, physically active aspects of outdoor education programs also have a role to play in promoting skilled trades. Experience gained from OEE, such as solving multi-faceted problems, managing risk, decision-making and development of motor skills, leads to greater capability of workers in the trades. Research also shows that students involved in outdoor education programs perform at a higher level than peers in traditional classrooms in standard academic subjects.
- OEE takes place in natural spaces where students engage with learning, rather than their cellphones (even without the need for a ban). Studies show that children pay more attention to real-life situations rather than computer-generated content. At the same time, modern e-learning technology can aid children with diverse needs in accessing and being comfortable outdoors. Mobile devices designed to support science education can enhance students' learning experience in the outdoors.

*“The e3 program was by far the best experience I have had in High School. I really enjoyed going on field trips and learning about the different environments around me. The best part about e3 was going on the class camping trip at the end of the year...The e3 program taught me about GPS, mapping, tree I.D, invasive species and aquatic invertebrates. Concepts that were covered in my first year of college as well as things I will be using in the following years of college.”*

- Larissa Howatt, e3 Program Student

## **Education for Well-Being**

Research shows that exposure to natural landscapes can have direct and positive impacts on mental and physical well-being. Access to active play in nature, is seen by many as an essential component of healthy child development.

### PHYSICAL

- When children are outside, they spend less time being sedentary and more time being physically active. Habits formed during childhood tend to remain into adulthood. OEE supports this by promoting physical activity and its health benefits throughout students' lives.
- Lack of physical activity is linked to cardiovascular disease, obesity, Type 2 diabetes and other serious health conditions, all requiring substantial health care expenditures by the province over time.
- Educators play an important role in engaging preschoolers in physically-active play outdoors. This has been shown to increase their enjoyment and level of physical activity.

### MENTAL

- OEE can foster a sense of place, helping youth to feel more at home in and better connected to their natural surroundings.
- Walking in forest environments has been shown to lower concentrations of cortisol (a stress hormone), when compared to walking in city environments.
- Psychological health benefits of time spent in nature include reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression.
- Time spent outdoors increases cognitive brain development, including one's ability to focus. Children as young as five have shown a significant reduction in the symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) when they are engaged in outdoor activities in natural settings. This effect carries over into traditional classroom settings.
- OEE introduces students to outdoor activities that are personally fulfilling and can be enjoyed throughout one's lifespan.

*“ECO Studies was the highlight of my high school career. I was and still am a student who has anxiety which made school difficult for me. ECO Studies allowed me to work towards managing my anxiety in a supportive environment that was made possible by the students and staff. Being in the structured environment that ECO Studies offered, allowed me to be confident and to work with other students. I carried this experience with me into college and in my everyday life. ECO Studies helped me grow into the person I am today.”*

- Alisha Howard-Belcher, 2017 ECO Studies Student

## **Education for Character**

When schools enrich their programs with character education, improvements in student success are observed. Thus, time and attention to character education pays dividends to curricular learning. Effective character development is based on repeated exposure to relationships between individuals, groups and places, which can be highlighted through OEE.

- OEE educates for character, helping to better prepare students for the demands of the future by promoting greater self-awareness, empathy, self-confidence and leadership.
- Experience with risks during childhood, as found in OEE, assists with developing risk management strategies, and thus, the ability to better negotiate decisions in adolescence around risks related to substance use, relationships and sexual behaviour.
- Much of the outdoor education-related research concerns the topic of resiliency, defined as the ability to respond or perform positively in the face of adversity and to achieve despite disadvantages. Outdoor play can contribute to the development of resilience in young children from challenging backgrounds.

*“ECO Studies allowed a class to re-invigorate their learning and passion for education, by finding its meaning and application outdoors and in each other. The program took students from all walks of life and taught them how to work together as a team, just as would be needed in a professional capacity. I believe that the application of learning and the community found among peers in the ECO Studies program also improved the mental health of myself and peers drastically.*

Megan Haley, HDSB ECO Studies graduate and 3<sup>rd</sup> year Dalhousie University Student