

OUTDOOR OPPORTUNITIES FOR MINNESOTA YOUTH LEGISLATIVE REPORT



As required by Laws of Minnesota 2024, Chapter 116, Article 3, Section 57

March 1, 2025

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources
Fish and Wildlife Division
500 Lafayette Road
St. Paul, MN 55155-4037
888-646-6367 or 651-296-6157

info.dnr@state.mn.us
mndnr.gov

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Statutory Reference

Laws of Minnesota 2024, Chapter 116, Article 3, Section 57

REPORT ON OUTDOOR OPPORTUNITIES FOR MINNESOTA YOUTH.

- (a) By March 1, 2025, the commissioner of natural resources must submit a report to the chairs and ranking minority members of the legislative committees and divisions with jurisdiction over environment policy and finance on state programs that facilitate opportunities for Minnesota youth to experience the outdoors, including:
 - (1) the No Child Left Inside program operated under Minnesota Statutes, section 84.976; and
 - (2) any other program operated by or funded through the Department of Natural Resources to facilitate opportunities for Minnesota youth to experience the outdoors.
- (b) The report required by this section must identify gaps in existing programs and must include recommendations for program and policy changes to increase opportunities to serve additional Minnesota youth through Outdoor School for All legislation or other proposals designed to increase access to the outdoors for underserved youth.

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Executive Summary

This report focuses on Minnesota's youth under the age of 18 and provides insight into the state's current outdoor program opportunities, gaps and recommendations to address declining youth participation in the outdoors, with specific focus on access as a barrier.

The information contained in this report was compiled following discussions with subject matter experts inside and outside of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. More than 90 entities, including DNR staff, Outdoor School for All coalition leaders, Tribal partners, students, nonprofit organizations and a variety of youth outdoor opportunity providers were invited to provide input for the development of this report. DNR held in-person and virtual meetings with representatives from 41 groups. The list of participating entities and a summary of input can be found in Appendix A – Youth outdoor opportunity provider input.

Below are the primary gaps and recommendations identified through this process to increase youth access to the outdoors in Minnesota. Program details and additional information is found within this report.

Primary gaps and recommendations

No Child Left Inside (NCLI) Grant Program

- Available funds meet approximately 30% to 50% of demand for NCLI grant requests.
 - **Recommend exploring sources of increased financial support, including sponsorships and private donations.**
- By statute grant funds are restricted to youth programming only.
 - **Recommend expanding allowance of grant funds for family-focused initiatives.**
- Youth do not have access to nearby nature areas.
 - **Recommend expanding allowance of grant funds to support development and maintenance of nature areas near schools and in communities.**
- Current grant procedures are prohibitive for small organizations.
 - **Recommend exploring ways to assist smaller applicants while ensuring sound oversight and accountability.**

Department of Natural Resources

- Public demand for outdoor youth programs is not being met by current resource levels.
 - **Recommend exploring ways to engage additional volunteers, expand mentorship and internship opportunities, and evaluate internal operations to maximize program efficiencies and explore opportunities to reprioritize.**
- There is limited evaluation of program successes and outcomes.
 - **Recommend exploring ways to formally evaluate program outcomes.**
- There is little agency-wide coordination of programs to optimize benefits and efficiencies of youth outdoor opportunities provided by the DNR.
 - **Recommend increased agency-wide coordination of programs that support outdoor opportunities for youth and families.**

Outdoor School for All Minnesota Youth

- Youth have increasingly limited opportunities to have significant residential outdoor experiences.
 - **Recommend allocating resources from the General Fund for the creation of a state program, Outdoor School for All Minnesota Youth, which would implement Minnesota’s statewide commitment of inclusive outdoor education through which communities will see every child provided a life-changing experience in the outdoors.**

Introduction

Background

Minnesota is known for our rich outdoor heritage and ethic. We pride ourselves on our close connection to nature through outdoor recreation, appreciation, cultural traditions and conservation. We are seen as a conservation leader in the country for our relationship with our natural resources. Yet our children today are losing their connection to the outdoors, spending less than 10 minutes a day engaged in free play outdoors. Research shows that time outdoors helps children thrive physically, emotionally and academically. From stress reduction to improved focus, engagement and academic performance, experiencing Minnesota's outdoors helps kids thrive.

The intent of this report is to identify gaps and provide recommendations for building on investments in youth outdoor opportunities the Minnesota legislature has made through the No Child Left Inside Grant Program starting in 2019, investments the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has made for decades through management of state-owned properties and the development of youth-focused programs and investments made by other individuals and entities throughout the state for youth to experience the outdoors including Outdoor School for All. By identifying gaps or disconnects in existing offerings, strategies can be focused to maximize impacts and effectiveness.

Although outside the scope of this report, we have included supplemental information in the attached appendices readers may find of interest. For example, in addition to a lack of resources and access to nearby nature areas, we heard several other gaps and recommendations which are highlighted in Appendix A – Youth outdoor opportunity provider input. Additional appendices include supporting documents about NCLI, data on participation rates, context around Minnesota's commitment to youth in the outdoors and more.

We acknowledge the great youth-focused efforts across the state by a variety of organizations to get youth outdoors, along with the challenges they face. Investing in connecting youth to nature now will help to produce the next generation of Minnesotans that rely on the outdoors for recreation, are knowledgeable about the natural environment and are ready to care for it and support industries that depend on Minnesota's forests, prairies, waters, fish and wildlife.

Methodology

DNR staff, leaders from the Outdoor School for All coalition, Tribal partners, students, nonprofit organizations and a variety of providers of outdoor opportunities were invited to give input for the development of this report. DNR staff held in-person and virtual meetings with representatives from 41 groups. Participants included:

- Residential Environmental Learning Centers
- Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights partners
- Hunting and fishing organizations
- Parks and recreation organizations
- Underserved/underrepresented audiences
- High school students

- Early Childhood Family Education groups
- Environmental education organizations
- Formal/non-formal educators
- Community organizations

Appendix A contains the full list of organizations invited to engage in the development of this report along with the input of those who participated. The following questions were the focus of discussions:

1. *What are the biggest program gaps to increase opportunities for youth to access the outdoors?*
2. *What program and policy changes are needed to address gaps?*
3. *What proposals do you recommend to increase access to the outdoors for underserved youth?*

Minnesota’s outdoor opportunities overview

Minnesota has a wide array of opportunities to connect youth to the outdoors. From millions of acres of public land and a broad network of nature centers to a robust outdoor recreation industry, Minnesota is a leader for youth in the outdoors.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources provides outdoor activities for individuals and families as well as organized groups and schools throughout Minnesota. State parks and trails, state forests, wildlife management areas and many other recreation areas create a mosaic of public land across the state, providing outdoor spaces for families and their children.

The large number of non-profit nature centers in Minnesota provides access to outdoor spaces and activities in local communities for youth and families, yet nature centers are most common across the urban landscapes of Minnesota and rarely available in rural areas. Nature centers, nature preschools, and similar nature or science-based organizations are the most common providers of coordinated outdoor experiences to the preK-5th grade age group of Minnesota children. Coordinated opportunities through nature centers and similar organizations are less commonly offered for middle to high school age youth.

This network of outdoor spaces and activities provides youth with opportunities to enhance their lives in a variety of ways. Research supports the many positive benefits of providing outdoor opportunities. For an overview of benefits see Appendix B – Outdoor research and benefits. In addition, many of these efforts support the Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights (see Appendix C), Minnesota’s commitment to providing equitable outdoor experiences for all children through 15 specific rights.

No Child Left Inside (NCLI)

The No Child Left Inside grant program exists to support and increase efforts to expand programming that connects youth to the outdoors. Originally funded by the 2019 Minnesota Legislature with continued funding from the 2021 and 2023 legislative sessions, these grants are provided for “outdoor environmental, ecological and other natural-resource-based education and recreation programs serving youth.”

The legislation requires grants to public entities and non-profit organizations to provide natural resource education and outdoor recreation with a priority to fund programs that reach youth with limited opportunities.

A basic tenet of NCLI is that getting more youth outside is crucial for the future stewardship of Minnesota's natural resources. Grants are awarded to nonprofits, schools, Tribal Nations and local entities who provide activities and resources for getting youth outdoors.

NCLI overview

Since the inception of NCLI (through FY24) there have been:

- 1,193 applications totaling \$10.1 million in requested funding
- 318 awarded grants
- \$2.9 million in awarded funding
- More than 90,000 youth participants (estimates total 91,455)
- Grants provided across Minnesota, with an emphasis on spreading the funding throughout regions of the state
- Awards to a variety of community organizations:
 - Nonprofits: 129 (41%)
 - Schools: 151 (47%)
 - Tribal Nations: 5 (2%)
 - Local municipalities: 33 (10%)
- Participants at a variety of age levels:
 - Pre-K: 7,911 (8%)
 - K-4th grade: 33,610 (37%)
 - 5th-8th grade: 34,524 (38%)
 - 9th-12th grade: 15,410 (17%)
- Most common use of NCLI grant funds are for:
 - Environmental/outdoor education equipment – 81.5%
 - Program fees – 32.9%
 - Transportation – 29.8%

A more detailed breakdown of grants fund usage can be found in Appendix C – NCLI legislation and grant usage.

From the outset, the Minnesota Legislature required grantees to commit to matching funds or in-kind resources to their projects to receive NCLI funding. All matching funds are tracked and have currently been tallied through FY23. To date grantees have provided a documented match of over 85% of the state funds distributed in dollars or in-kind services.

The 2021 Legislature directed the DNR develop a process to begin collecting private donations for NCLI. Since August 2022, the DNR has managed an [online portal](#) for individuals and others to make donations to the program. To date, the DNR has received \$2,489 in donations for the program, which has been added to the available grant funds. NCLI could increase donations through additional marketing and pursuit of external donations and partnerships.

Grant availability is primarily advertised through the DNR [NCLI webpages](#) and quarterly department email newsletter. The newsletter highlights a variety of outdoor, recreation, and natural resource outreach programs, grant opportunities and youth resources. As of November 2024, the newsletter has nearly 18,000 subscribers.

High interest and demand

After the initial appropriation for NCLI in 2019, DNR staff held discussions with multiple stakeholders in development of the program. That year, DNR offered an initial phase of mini grants (up to \$200,000 with a

\$5,000 maximum per request). The applications for these Phase 1 mini grants opened on Oct. 23, 2019, at 9 a.m. with six weeks' notice. The response was overwhelming with 200 applications by 9:06 a.m. and a total of over 400 applications requesting over \$1.2 million were received by noon, when the application process was closed.

The remaining funds of approximately \$1 million from the first year of the program were dedicated for a Phase 2 of larger grants in a competitive process with six weeks' notice to apply and a maximum request of \$49,999 allowed. Again, response and demand were significant with 220 applications requesting over \$5 million.

The overwhelming demand led the DNR to re-evaluate the application criteria and requirements to reduce the number of applications to a manageable level. Despite additional restrictions, applications continue to request two to three times more funding than available.

The highest interest in the program has been for projects focused on natural resource education and outdoor recreation. While interest in fishing and hunting programs was strong in the first couple of years, demand for these programs has decreased the last couple of years and all eligible fishing and hunting project applications were funded:

2023, 24% of requested funds were for fishing/hunting projects. (\$412K of \$1.75M)

2024, 13% of requested funds were for fishing/hunting projects. (\$307K of \$2.29M)

Underserved youth a priority

As directed by the Minnesota Legislature, the DNR has prioritized underserved youth participation. In the first years of the program, underserved audience participation was tracked through participation in free and reduced-priced lunch, which is a consistent indicator of financial need in youth as advised by data experts at the Minnesota Department of Education. With overwhelming requests in the first year of the program, the program prioritized projects that served youth with limited opportunities. Consequently, the percentage of underserved youth has grown significantly. With the introduction of the Minnesota Free School Meals Program, additional indicators were added in 2024 to provide other means for applicants to document reaching underserved youth. These included childhood poverty statistics from the U.S. Census, narrative descriptions of audience need and working within environmental justice areas. Environmental justice areas are locations the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency identifies for meaningful community engagement and additional evaluation for disproportionate effects from pollution.

Percentage of grantees that have 40% or higher numbers of youth eligible for free and reduced priced lunch:

- FY20 – 46%
- FY21 – 73%
- FY22 – 94%
- FY23 – 95%
- FY24 – New categories of need added due to start of Minnesota Free School Meals Program
 - 1) 59% of grantees reported 40% or higher numbers of youth eligible for free and reduced priced lunch
 - 2) 51% of grantees reported they served youth that experience higher levels of childhood poverty than the Minnesota average
 - 3) In addition, grantees also reported working with these underserved audiences: individuals with physical disabilities, autism/neurodivergent; culturally underrepresented, recent immigrants, English-language learners, LGBTQ, and military families

Our data show 90% of NCLI grantees reach students that fall into an underserved category based on socioeconomic or childhood poverty statistics. DNR began to request demographic reporting on gender and race/ethnicity in FY24. This reporting is optional and will be collected when projects are completed in June 2025.

Connections to Outdoor School for All (Residential Environmental Learning Centers - RELCs)

The priority of the Outdoor School for All Initiative to provide funds for youth attending RELCs, has been an eligible activity of the NCLI program since inception. The DNR has awarded NCLI grants directly to four different residential environmental learning centers totaling \$79,463. These grants were used for accessibility equipment, fishing and water recreation equipment, archery and firearms training, trail bicycles, classroom teacher training and scholarships for low-income students. There have also been organizations, both schools and nonprofits, who have utilized their grant funds to attend RELC programming.

Thirteen grantees in 2024 (14%) indicated that at least a portion of their grant funds would be used for programming at nature centers or environmental learning centers.

NCLI grant outcomes

Table 1: NCLI Grants

Program Year	Total amount appropriated	Type of grant mini or large	Number of Grant Applicants	Total Amount Requested	Number of Grants Awarded	Total Amount Awarded	\$ Match	Number of Youth Reached
2019 (FY20)	\$1.2M	Mini	342	\$1.22M	59	\$239K	\$129K	12,619 A
2020 (FY21)	\$1.2M	Larger	221	\$2.77M	38	\$692K	\$320K	10,706 A
2021 (FY22)	\$450K	Mini/Larger	222	\$2.11M	60	\$461K	\$573K	14,914 A
2022 (FY23)	\$450K	Mini/Larger	192	\$1.75M	64	\$625K	\$697K	11,920 A
2023 (FY24)	\$1M	Mini/Larger	216	\$2.29M	97	\$947K	To Be Determined (TBD)	41,296 E (higher than actual to come)
2024 (FY25)	\$1M	Mini/Larger	228	\$2.48M	TBD	TBD	TBD	TBD

A-Actual E-Estimated

NCLI program gaps

Despite the success of the NCLI program, there are program gaps. For example, the NCLI enabling legislation is restricted to funding opportunities specific to youth, however families and caregivers are critical to supporting youth engagement in the outdoors. More flexibility to support programs for families would increase the effectiveness and impact of funded activities.

DNR receives multiple inquiries about NCLI for outdoor learning space investments (nature areas, outdoor classrooms, public play spaces, trail building, fishing piers, nature playgrounds, etc.) to establish nearby places that children can access frequently. The program doesn't currently have enough resources to fund these requests, but it is a recognized need, particularly for public entities.

Interest in outdoor opportunities in early childhood has increased significantly in the last few years, and many private providers, which are currently not eligible, have approached the DNR about NCLI funding. In addition, many eligible small organizations have struggled with the state's insurance and contract requirements, which would require legislative and agency policy changes. Increasing state grant and contract administrative requirements, even for mini grants (under \$5,000) make it difficult for small organizations to complete all necessary requirements. Standard grant procedures also require all grants to be reimbursable and no funds up front, which also makes it difficult for organizations to balance their books.

NCLI recommendations

- Available funds meet approximately 30% to 50% of demand for NCLI grant requests.
 - **Recommend exploring sources of increased financial support, including sponsorships and private donations.**
- Grant funds are restricted by statute to youth programming only.
 - **Recommend expanding allowance of grant funds for family-focused initiatives.**
- Youth do not have access to nearby nature areas.
 - **Recommend expanding allowance of grant funds to support development and maintenance of nature areas near schools and in communities.**
- Current grant procedures are prohibitive for small organizations.
 - **Recommend exploring ways to assist smaller applicants while ensuring sound oversight and accountability.**

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

The DNR recognizes the importance of providing outdoor opportunities for youth and connecting them to the outdoors. These opportunities support DNR's Conservation Agenda (see Appendix E).

DNR outdoor opportunities for youth overview

The DNR has a long history of connecting youth to the outdoors through its programs, events and resources. For over 85 years, these efforts have supported aspects of DNR's mission to work with citizens to conserve and manage Minnesota's natural resources and provide outdoor recreation opportunities.

As early as 1938, state parks began conducting interpretive programming. The first school forest (outdoor classroom) was established in Blackduck in 1952. Firearms safety training began in 1955 and has contributed greatly to providing a safe way to enjoy the outdoors by reducing hunting-related injury as well as getting and keeping youth connected to the outdoors. The DNR is building capacity by connecting youth to the outdoors through teacher trainings such as Project Learning Tree (1978-present), Project WILD (1984-2018) and Project WET (1995-present). The I Can Camp! program began in 2010 and has led to a series of other I Can! programs that engage youth in the outdoors.

Today, the DNR supports a variety of programs and efforts to help youth get outdoors and to train leaders to engage with youth outside. Programs usually occur in tandem with family, friends or schools. These experiences are key to sparking an interest in nature and the outdoors. Descriptions of current DNR outdoor opportunities for youth, including participant numbers through the years, can be found in Appendix F – DNR programs and participant numbers.

In addition to programming, Minnesota DNR public lands offer a wide range of outdoor recreation opportunities to help connect youth to the outdoors. The DNR manages 5.6 million acres of state lands, about 11% of Minnesota's total land area, or roughly one acre per person. Most Minnesotans live within 30 miles of a state park or recreation area. The majority require no fees to access or explore these lands and parking areas are available. Examples of these spaces include:

- Aquatic Management Areas (AMAs)
 - 700-plus AMAs across the state
 - Fishing: enjoy shore fishing, wildlife observation or hunting
- Public Water Accesses (boat launches)
 - 1,700-plus accesses and an additional 390 fishing piers, platforms and shore-fishing sites
 - Fishing: cast a line in one of numerous lakes or rivers
 - Boating: use public water access points for motorized and non-motorized watercraft
 - Paddling: explore scenic routes like the Mississippi River State Water Trail
- Scientific and Natural Areas (SNAs)
 - 170 total SNAs across the state
 - Photography and birding: capture stunning views of rare plant and animal species
 - Nature study: visit unique ecosystems preserved for their ecological significance
 - Tours: participate in guided walks or self-led exploration
- State Forests
 - 60 state forests
 - Dispersed camping: camp for free in designated areas with minimal infrastructure
 - Hunting and foraging: participate in regulated hunting seasons or forage for berries and mushrooms
 - Off-highway vehicle (OHV) use: ride ATVs, dirt bikes, or snowmobiles on designated trails

- State Parks and Recreation Areas
 - 64 state parks and 9 recreation areas
 - Free Park Days: Minnesota State Parks offer four free days annually; waiving vehicle permit fees to encourage exploration of the state’s natural beauty across the seasons.
 - Hiking and nature walks: explore diverse landscapes, from prairies to forest, and many parks have maintained trails for all skill levels
 - Camping: choose from rustic campsites, group sites or camper cabins
 - Wildlife watching: observe native wildlife, including birds, deer, and even wolves or moose in certain areas
 - Water activities: enjoy canoeing, kayaking, fishing, and swimming in lakes and rivers

- State Trails
 - 1,500 miles of multi-use state trails, nearly 25,000 miles of grant-in-aid trails, and 3,400 miles of trails within state parks, recreation areas and forests
 - Biking: ride on paved and gravel trails like the Root River Trail or Gateway State Trail
 - Horseback riding: some trails accommodate equestrian use
 - Snowmobiling and cross-country skiing: explore the winter wonderland on groomed trails

- Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs)
 - 1,500-plus WMAs across the state
 - Hunting: pursue deer, waterfowl, bear, upland birds or small game during designated seasons
 - Hiking: discover lesser-known trails and habitats
 - Bird watching: spot migrating birds in these protected areas

For additional information on DNR public resources visit [Minnesota Department of Natural Resources 2023 by the Numbers.](#)

DNR program gaps

The DNR is an expert in our state’s natural resources. People look to the agency for accurate and credible information and opportunities to interact with the outdoors. Unfortunately, transportation to our public lands and outdoor spaces can be a limitation for some families and youth. Even though the DNR is providing a variety of resources and programs, public demand often exceeds current staffing, volunteer, and funding levels. Further, policies related to youth data collection and grant restrictions can inhibit thorough evaluation of the success of our youth outdoor programs. Finally, there is inadequate coordination across the DNR between the various outdoor youth programs, which may lead to inefficiencies or unintentional gaps in programming.

DNR recommendations

- Public demand for outdoor youth programs is not being met by current resource levels.
 - **Recommend exploring ways to engage additional volunteers, expand mentorship and internship opportunities, and evaluate internal operations to maximize program efficiencies and explore opportunities to reprioritize.**

- There is limited evaluation of program successes and outcomes.
 - **Recommend exploring ways to formally evaluate program outcomes.**
- Transportation to outdoor spaces and programs can be a barrier.
 - **Recommend exploring partnerships with schools, community organizations, and others to provide transportation to state parks, forests, and recreation areas.**
- There is little agency-wide coordination of programs to optimize benefits and efficiencies of youth outdoor opportunities provided by the Department.
 - **Recommend increased agency-wide coordination of programs that support outdoor opportunities for youth and families.**

Outdoor School for All (OSFA)

OSFA is a coalition of the state’s five accredited overnight Residential Environmental Learning Centers (RELCs), referred to as outdoor schools in this report. OSFA is championing legislation that would give every Minnesota student the opportunity to connect with nature by attending an accredited overnight outdoor program.

Overview

Minnesota is uniquely fortunate to have a variety of organizations and people that help Minnesota youth get outdoors. For over 60 years, Minnesota’s Residential Environmental Learning Centers have provided a place for transformative youth outdoor school programming, fostering environmental stewardship and supporting the state’s educational and environmental goals. Each center offers unique programs tailored to its surrounding ecosystems, promoting outdoor recreation, field-based science learning, cultural history, and environmental stewardship. With some centers hosting three generations of Minnesotans, outdoor school has been provided to more than one million Minnesota youth. Today, five RELCs are the only currently accredited outdoor school providers throughout the state. They include Deep Portage Learning Center in Hackensack, Eagle Bluff Environmental Learning Center in Lanesboro, Long Lake Conservation Center in Palisade, Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center in Sandstone and Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center in Finland. As modeled by other states such as Oregon and Washington where Outdoor School for All has already been established, the development of an Outdoor School for All program will result in programmatic and rural economic growth as additional providers are needed and become accredited.

Additional information on each RELC can be found in Appendix G – Residential environmental learning centers.

The cornerstone program of the RELCs is the overnight outdoor school programs that immerse K-12 students in hands-on environmental education and outdoor recreation experiences. Outdoor school programs provide safe, comfortable, and accessible places for learning and develop participants’ sense of self and community while enhancing mental health through total immersion in nature. These outdoor learning experiences for children occur with teachers and parents who together share the multi-day experience. Because they live and learn together, students develop close ties to their surroundings, their community members, and peers, all the while engaging in the immersive study of nature and how people connect to and recreate in the outdoors.

Minnesota's outdoor schools are accredited as special purpose schools by Cognia, one of the school accreditations recognized and accepted by the Minnesota Department of Education. This distinction sets them apart from all other outdoor youth programs in Minnesota. Cognia accreditation is a rigorous process that ensures educational institutions meet high standards for academic quality, accountability, and continuous improvement. For these outdoor schools, it means they are recognized for providing a comprehensive and well-structured learning experience, blending traditional education with outdoor exploration. This accreditation not only validates their educational approach but also assures parents, students, and the community that the schools are dedicated to maintaining the highest standards of excellence and fostering an environment where students can thrive both academically and personally. With the growth of an established Outdoor School for All Minnesota Youth program, future providers would be required to become accredited.

Current participation rates

As shown through decades of participation, outdoor learning at residential environmental learning centers is an activity of great inclusion, where all students of one grade level and in many cases of an entire community, are provided the opportunity. In turn, each year a new group of students experience outdoor learning, and over time every child in the community participates. With parent support through participation in the experience, it is an experience integrated into the community. Where many school programs for youth are often provided only to small groups of children in sport, music, or similar activities within a school, it is rare that all students are equitably afforded a shared experience through outdoor schools. For over three generations, outdoor learning at RELCs in Minnesota has been a commitment by schools and their communities to enable a coming of age in the outdoors for their youth. While many youths have been able to participate in this experience, participation is declining, and many communities have been left out.

Minnesota outdoor school participation decline

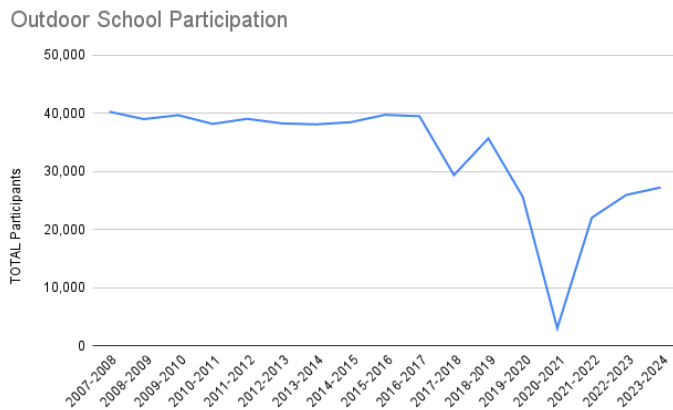
While declines in participation had already begun at RELCs, the impact of the COVID pandemic put additional pressures on schools, teachers, and students which continues to have a negative impact. The opportunity for outdoor learning has not recovered and actual permanent losses have occurred. The peak of outdoor school participation occurred in the 1990s, then again in the early 2000s with a plateau of participation that followed. In the past 10 years, a steady and continued decline has occurred.

- Minnesota children's participation in outdoor school at the accredited RELCs has dropped by 31% over the past 10 years.
- Participation of 39,739 students occurred in the 2015-16 school year. While the pandemic had obvious effects, the decline began prior to the pandemic and participation has only returned to 27,242 in the 2023-24 school year. (Figure 1 – Outdoor school participation changes)
- The pandemic also caused the closure of one of six accredited outdoor school providers in Minnesota, the Laurentian Environmental Center, near Virginia, Minnesota. Just this one loss of a provider created a decrease of approximately 4,000 Minnesota students annually experiencing outdoor school.

County data analysis of the 2021-22 Minnesota school year participation in outdoor school shows:

- Only 30% of children have access to an outdoor school experience at an accredited RELC.
- Only 15% of Minnesota schools can provide this outdoor learning experience.
- There are 21 counties in Minnesota where no children are provided this experience: Brown, Chippewa, Clay, Clearwater, Cottonwood, Freeborn, Jackson, Koochiching, Lac qui Parle, Lincoln, Lyon, Mahnomen, Murray, Nobles, Norman, Pipestone, Renville, Rock, Swift, Traverse and Watonwan.
- Only six counties in Minnesota have more than 1,000 students provided the outdoor school experience: Anoka, Carver, Hennepin, Ramsey, St. Louis and Wright. In these six counties the average free/reduced lunch program status is 35%.
- In the 21 counties listed above where no children can participate in outdoor school the average free/reduced lunch program status is 44%.

Figure 1. Outdoor school participation changes.



Tribal Nation participation

The presented data encompass all youth currently able to participate in outdoor school, both Minnesota and the sovereign nations of the state. Every Tribal school in the state sends their youth to one of the five outdoor school programs. Some outdoor school programs have Native advisors that support their curricular development and the incorporation of a Native narrative in outdoor learning for youth. These Native advisors advocate and support the experience of outdoor school for youth, inclusive of classes facilitated on Native life, a subject often taught at outdoor school.

Contact hours with a high level of engagement

The most distinguishing difference from an outdoor school visit compared to any other type of school field trip is the intensive amount of time spent learning outdoors. While typical school field trips might have one to two educational contact hours, students attending an outdoor school over a typical two-night, three-day visit receive 18 instructional hours with 29 contact hours. This in-depth and total immersion learning experience cannot be duplicated by other school field trips and is one of the many reasons these experiences are so profound for children enabled to attend. Often described for the combination of social emotional learning in conjunction with science and social studies learning, parents and teachers commonly use “a coming of age” or “transformational” as descriptors for the positive impact upon a child. This high level of engagement creates lifelong memories for their learning and a relationship with the outdoors.

OSFA barriers to participation

The history of the RELCs in Minnesota enables annual and ongoing feedback from over 200 Minnesota communities and hundreds of schools that documents an evolution over decades. The most described barriers are:

- Financial, both for program expenses and transportation. Years ago, schools funded the trip for all students, whereas now the funding comes from student fundraisers or parents who can afford the expense.
- Teacher compensation and time
- Cultural demographic change where comfort for or accessibility to such programs exists

Commonly mentioned barriers, which are addressed by accredited outdoor school providers:

- Fear and discomfort for parents and children – physical, accessibility, language and many other fears exist. Accredited RELCs address these needs with professionally trained educators, provided outdoor clothing, multilingual class instruction, adaptive equipment and safe and accessible sites for all.
- Parent understanding of and comfort with the experience – with all the youth of a community participating each year, families develop and pass an understanding throughout the community regarding the values of such an experience. The family-to-family passing of knowledge is shown over time to grow comfort and diminish fear in a community.
- Teacher capacity – where formal classroom teachers were not trained for this type of learning facilitation, credentialed educators at accredited outdoor schools model the techniques for classroom teachers and are skilled in facilitating the outdoor learning. Outdoor school for classroom teachers is an opportunity for professional development. These structured programs absorb most challenges a teacher would face if trying to facilitate this level of outdoor learning for their students.
- Administrative, curricular and related challenges or capacity – outdoor schools are accredited providers who in turn provide liability coverage and academic standards-based learning experiences. The contact hours and instruction at an outdoor school are accredited, and in turn are not hours lost in the academic calendar of a school.

OSFA recommendation

- Youth have increasingly limited opportunities to have significant residential outdoor experiences.
 - **Recommend the creation of a state program, Outdoor School for All Minnesota Youth, which will demonstrate and implement a statewide commitment of inclusive outdoor education through which communities will see every child provided a life-changing experience in the outdoors.**

OSFA summary

“Minnesotans hold two things quite dear — our children and the outdoors. We are at a point where parents and leaders of our state who grew up outdoors are now watching their children and grandchildren losing those connections, to the detriment of their health. We must take action to ensure our future generations maintain an authentic connection to Minnesota’s outdoors and continue to see nature as a place of recreation, renewal and valued engagement.” Peter Smerud, Wolf Ridge ELC/Outdoor School for All

Appendix A – Youth outdoor opportunity provider input

Youth outdoor opportunity provider participants

Outdoor School for All Entities

- Eagle Bluff Residential Environmental Learning Center
- Wolf Ridge Residential Environmental Learning Center
- Long Lake Residential Environmental Learning Center
- Deep Portage Residential Environmental Learning Center
- Osprey Wilds Residential Environmental Learning Center

Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights (COBR) Partners

- Wilderness Inquiry
- North Hennepin Community College
- Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families
- Project Success
- Minnesota Zoo
- Elpis Enterprises Outdoors
- ISD 197, Garlough School Forest/Environmental Magnet School

Other Entities

- Ducks Unlimited
- Minnesota State High School Clay Target League
- High school angling clubs
- Minnesota Naturalists Association
- Minnesota Department of Health
- University of Minnesota Extension
- University of Minnesota
- Dakota County Parks
- Washington County Parks
- Three Rivers Park District
- Dodge Nature Center
- Minnesota Association for Environmental Education
- School of Environmental Studies, Environmental Justice class – 20 high school students
- Urban Ventures
- Humbolt High School St. Paul
- Saint Paul Parks and Recreation
- Urban Roots
- Mississippi Watershed Management Organization

- Friends of the Mississippi River
- University of Minnesota Child Development Laboratory School
- Minneapolis Nature Preschool
- Hartley Nature Center
- Circulo de Amigos Child Care Center
- ISD 196, Early Childhood Special Education

Tribal Partners

- White Earth Nation, Natural Resources Divisional Director
- Bois Forte Heritage Center, Heritage Center Director
- Prairie Island, Program Manager, Environmental Specialist & Conservation Biologist
- NCLI Tribal Grantee, White Earth Nation, White Earth Tribal Conservation Officer

Input from youth outdoor opportunity providers

Input was collected from a variety of entities that provide or engage in getting youth outdoors. Eight meetings were conducted via Microsoft Teams or in-person to collect input and provide viewpoints on overarching program gaps and policy recommendations. Although there were a variety of providers, main themes arose. Their insight is detailed below and helped to guide and support the recommendations in this report.

Other organizations providing outdoor opportunities for Minnesota youth

These Minnesota groups are important to providing youth opportunities in the outdoors.

- Families and adult supporters
- Nature centers
- Schools
- Community organizations
- Non-profit organizations
- Faith organizations
- Zoos
- Girl and Boy Scouts
- Camps

Youth outdoor opportunity providers identified gaps in existing programs

Overarching gaps

The following have been identified as significant gaps in getting youth outdoors throughout Minnesota, regardless of location, audience, approach or type of program. Through discussions, providers identified nine main gap categories to youth accessing the outdoors.

1. Family focus need

If parents don't support their kids going outside, they don't go. Parents are key! There is often an absence of parents, guardians or families in outdoor education programming.

- Lack of individual family support and programming.
- Overarching social needs of students; they only have a few hours of free time. Every group fighting over this time.
- Kids and parents are busy with activities; it can be hard to find outdoor time together.
- Many parents are afraid when their kids are alone outside.

2. Resource needs

Lack of resources and funding for items, particularly gear, came up in every group we talked with. Transportation ran a tight second.

- Lack of gear (having and bringing): hiking shoes, heavy pants, rain/snow pants, good socks, mittens/gloves, sleeping bags, backpacks, ice fishing, netting, etc.; often don't know what is needed.
- Transportation availability and costs, particularly busing. Fewer drivers also restricts time available.
- Cost to get into parks and to access online outdoor courses (hunter/ATV education) is a barrier to underserved communities.
- Firearms/ammunition becoming costly.

3. Access to nearby nature

Kids are more likely to have outdoor experiences if they can easily get to it.

- Lack of physical access to outdoors (close to nature/green space, transportation, time, etc.).
- Barren schoolyards, trees cut for safety reasons.

4. Data/research/evaluation limitations

There are many programs occurring across Minnesota that get kids outdoors, but not a lot of program-specific data to show how effective they are at achieving certain outcomes. This creates limited research data and challenges to evaluate and communicate the benefits of outdoor programming.

- Lack of data/research/evaluation information on specific program impact and youth served.
- Limited demographic baseline data on underserved youth being reached outdoors.
- Barriers to collecting youth data.
- Can't make data-driven decisions on most effective outdoor programming without data.

5. Not feeling comfortable outdoors

Fear is prevalent around being outdoors and in nature. Adults (parents, teachers, guardians, others) often are not comfortable outdoors. This passes down to the kids.

Fears include:

- Kids alone outside, especially in the dark
- Lakes/rivers/water, because don't know how to swim
- The unknown/don't know enough
- Weather (cold, sunburn)
- Larger tracks of land (nobody out here)
- Plants/animals (bugs, poison ivy, worms on hook, coyotes)
- Traveling through rural communities
- Not having the right gear
- Unknown leaders
- Overnight experience fears and trust issues related to unknowns such as lodging/roommates, gender, food, bathing, language and accessibility barriers

- Walking to urban parks due to encampments, gang issues
- Impact of cultural negative experiences with outdoors and nature

There is a higher level of fear for kids with disabilities and their caregivers. Elopement (fleeing from safety) is a large barrier to getting children with developmental differences outdoors in nature. Kids with autism are drawn to water and 167% more likely to drown. In Minnesota, 4% of children have a physical disability and 17% of kids have a mental disability, including ADHD, Down syndrome or autism.

6. Administrative or structural barriers

Overall, there are very deep seeded bureaucratic and structural barriers in the K-12 school system that vary by grade level. Administrative barriers at schools include scheduling, liability or perception of risk, content standards and lack of support. School staff also lack understanding that outdoor learning is not an add-on but a change of setting for regular in-school and after-school activities. Many of these barriers have been an ongoing challenge over the years, as supported by the [2008 Outdoor Education Legislative Report](#).

Teacher barriers

- Difficult to get teacher support, need substitute teachers, leaves school lacking staff for those who aren't on the trip
- Lack of teacher training and professional development on how to use the outdoors as an active and important learning space
- Lack of teacher capacity
- Teacher contract restrictions related to teaching time
- Scheduling challenges. Short classroom time in high school, hard to get outside. Competition of time with other activities. Teacher schedules are hard to change.
- Increasing class size
- Lack of understanding of how aligns with the curriculum standards
- Lack of flexibility in the curriculum standards
- For overnight programming, challenges related to behavior issues, medications, special needs, language barriers and lack of chaperones and teachers willing to go

Parent and student barriers

- Lack of student voices.
- English language learners' (ELL) understanding
- To new immigrants, forms (such as field trip permission) and policies are scary; parents don't understand
- Need for accessibility to a safe environment due to challenges at home; I see you, hear you.
- Kids in highly structured sports that might be outside, but not nature based

Administrative or facility barriers

- Lack of buy-in from administration and administrative support
- Administration challenges: contracts, risk management, school or county releases; especially with English language learners
- Temperature window in schools for going outside. Potential new stricter limitations on time allowed outdoors in certain temperatures.

- Limitation of distance a child can be from school is 2,000 feet
- Lack of funding for outdoor programming
- Lack of support for hunting. Lack of school staffing or facility support for hunting and fishing-related programming and facility use. Guns are not allowed in schools for Tribal or other hunter education classes.
- Green space is not utilized or maintained
- Less opportunity for outdoor education experiences as students age and move through the grade levels
- Outdoor activities are not incorporated into existing school systems
- Lack of communication between facilities staff/teachers, etc.

7. Outdoor program provider limitations

Cultural changes in program participants have created various provider limitations.

- Overall providers don't have capacity (space/staffing/resources) to meet program demand.
- Diverse groups can have a lack of trust with providers.
- Providers don't always have the training or comfort to work with diverse audiences.
- Nature center programs are still primarily white.
- Lack of community liaisons within organizations
- Multiple language barriers
- Lack of representation (diversity) in program leaders
- Hard to find volunteers to help with outdoor programming, especially long-term and on weekends and evenings
- Diverse audiences can feel parks are too white or don't know they are for them.
- Diverse communities wanting to do their own events versus going to "ours"

8. Lack of coordinated efforts

Although a strong state [statute](#) for environmental education exists, including "access to experiences," there is no place in state leadership to support it.

- No progressive outdoor system experience. Gateway outdoor local experiences could bridge with a progression of experiences to go further.
- Need support for outdoor programming from parents, teachers, school administration up to state level.
- No person with a nature-based focus at Minnesota Department of Education.
- Overall lack of coordinated efforts among providers.

9. Communication gaps

There is an overall lack of understanding of the importance of getting kids outdoors and what is available. Potential participants don't know where to go, what to do or how to find what is happening.

- Overall lack of awareness and understanding of the value (physical and mental) of getting kids outdoors
- Unaware of outdoor opportunities, programs or resources for parents, schools and diverse communities

10. Additional gaps identified specific to the NCLI program

- Family and adult community programming is not eligible for the grants
- Not enough grant funding available
- For-profit organizations not eligible to apply for grants
- Rigorous financing requirements pose challenges (insurance, liability, grant-making expertise, funding reserves to cover reimbursement process, etc.) for grant applicants
- Amount of time and resources required to track and manage grant processes can be overwhelming for grantees.
- Time period to apply is too short to get through administrative processes for Tribal organizations.
- Lack of information and examples of successful NCLI grants.

Youth outdoor opportunity providers recommended program and policy changes to increase youth outdoor access

Resources

Increase resources particularly for outdoor gear, transportation, outdoor programming and creation of nearby nature spaces.

Dedicated ongoing program funding

- Funding for outdoor education
 - Gear
 - Transportation
 - Staffing
 - Programming
 - Program resources (in multiple languages)
- Create a program with funding enabling Outdoor School for All Minnesota children
- More outdoor programming for kids under the age of 12 (research supported)
- Outdoor play spaces: free play is important
- Risk assessment resources
- School naturalists at schools or districts
- Outdoor fear mitigation: fund underserved fundamental safety classes, including water safety, learn how to bike, swim, be safe around water
- Need social safety nets for cultural groups that do more in nature
- Need support for close programs

Outdoor learning infrastructure

- Resources to fund facility development, adaptive equipment (track chairs), broadening calming spaces, right accommodations, private space, approachability
- Provide resources to create green space around schools
- Year-round bass season for kids
- Minnesota Department of Education design requirements that include space for outdoor learning

- Provide state funding to encourage public schools to establish and support on- or near-campus outdoor learning spaces, with the goal to enable every child in Minnesota to experience frequent, short trips into nearby nature
- Provide money directly to schools for nature-based learning
- Provide resources to create large (three acres or more) fenced green spaces to provide safe nature spaces for children with developmental differences and their caregivers

Reduce financial barriers to increase access

- Free entrance into parks, free ski passes etc.
- Decrease granting restrictions.

Leader training and support

Provide outdoor programming, along with training and support for adults, particularly caregivers and educators, in understanding how and why it is important to engage youth in outdoor spaces and activities starting from a very young age.

Family

- Critical to focus on getting support from parents, family members and caring adults to engage and support kids in outdoor spaces and activities, starting when very young
- Provide more family support, opportunities and programs

School staff

- Minnesota Department of Education works with partners to provide mentoring and professional development for pre-service teachers and in-service teachers on nature-based learning and how to teach outdoors and meet the standards.
- Support teachers and school staff participation in outdoor school experiences by providing outdoor education methods modeling and training to facilitate learning in the outdoors
- In-service training for school administrators, school boards for including outdoor education at their schools
- Optimize quality, cultural relevance and language of inclusive trainings focused on taking kids outdoors and why it's important

Outdoor program providers

- Cultural trainings
- More connections with various communities
- Basic classes to create more comfort in nature: swimming lessons, water safety
- Increase cultural competency and staff diversity of providers
- Incorporate outdoor activities into cultural events; go to the community
- Support outdoor education community efforts and programming

Outdoor education leadership at state level

Establish statewide support and cross-agency collaboration to create a continuum of outdoor opportunities from early childhood to adulthood.

Statewide plan and support, interagency coordination for outdoor education; from local, ground-level progressive experiences leading up to an overnight experience. Continuous program throughout the years.

- Implement the Minnesota Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights.
- Ensure all Minnesota children and families can engage with the natural world in ways that support physical activity, mental well-being, creativity and appreciation for nature.
- Workforce – connect daily experiences to outdoor career success, funding a way into work.
- Increase commitments to professional learning facilitation through increased provider accreditation of outdoor education programs.
- Provide learning opportunities, particularly for secondary students, where career modeling in natural resources and field science is integrated.

Better research and models

Gather targeted program data to assess effectiveness and guide future strategy.

Research and collect program specific data that can tie to goals of program effectiveness and achievement. Informing future program direction.

- Need better data to show program impact.
- Collect data and analyze toward goals.

Communication and marketing

Promote outdoor experiences for youth and the long-term benefits using multilingual advertising, especially targeting parents via social media and other channels.

Use a variety of languages to better advertise, especially to parents, through commercials, social media and other venues.

- The many values of kids outdoors (mental/physical, etc.) and long-term impact opportunities/resources/spaces available to get outdoors

Appendix B – Outdoor research and benefits

Benefits of youth having access to the outdoors

Research consistently highlights getting kids outdoors has significant benefits of for their overall development and is vital for their physical, mental and emotional well-being. Spending time outside encourages physical activity, which improves cardiovascular health, motor development and reduces the risk of childhood obesity.

Studies show that time spent in nature can enhance cognitive function, particularly attention and problem-solving skills, by reducing mental fatigue and restoring focus and attention. It also improves mental health by reducing stress and enhancing mood. Research links outdoor play to better mental health outcomes, including reduced symptoms of anxiety, depression and stress. It also supports emotional resilience by promoting a sense of calm and connection to nature.

Socially, outdoor environments encourage collaboration, conflict resolution and creativity in children as they often involve unstructured play and imaginative exploration. Exposure to nature fosters creativity and curiosity, allowing children to explore and learn through hands-on experiences.

Moreover, exposure to nature and green spaces has been found to boost academic performance. Studies suggest that children who regularly spend time in natural settings do better in subjects like math, reading, writing, social studies and science due to increased curiosity and engagement. This is due to the stress-reducing and mood-enhancing effects of nature, creating a positive mindset for learning. It improves focus and attention, particularly in children with attention deficit disorders, as it reduces mental fatigue and promotes cognitive restoration. This heightened ability to concentrate often translates into better classroom behavior and learning outcomes.

Outdoor experiences, such as exploring ecosystems or engaging in hands-on science activities, also foster curiosity and critical thinking, which are essential skills for academic success. Time in nature has been linked to increased problem-solving abilities, enabling children to approach academic challenges more effectively. Moreover, the physical activity associated with outdoor play boosts brain function by improving blood flow and oxygenation, which can enhance memory and learning.

Additionally, outdoor learning environments often involve collaborative and experiential approaches, which deepen understanding and retention of knowledge.

Early exposure to the outdoors fosters environmental awareness and stewardship, encouraging children to value and protect the natural world as they grow. Spending time in nature during childhood, and role models who care for nature, are the two biggest factors that contribute to environmental stewardship in adulthood.

For additional information and resources, see the following graphic or visit the [Children and Nature Network](#).

Children and Nature Network Research

Children & Nature Network Research Library [Research Library](#) | [Children & Nature Network](#)

Benefits of youth outdoors

INCREASED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY
Access to parks and greenspace can foster:

- INCREASED PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**^{11,12}
- REDUCED RISK OF OBESITY**¹³

OUTDOOR PLAY
increases the likelihood that girls will remain active into adolescence⁹

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL WELLBEING
Learning in nature can support:

- IMPROVED RELATIONSHIP SKILLS**^{17, 20}
- REDUCED STRESS**¹⁷
ANGER^{18,19}
AND AGGRESSION^{18,19}

Children are better able to cope with stress when they live near trees and other greenery.^{15, 16}

Children and Nature Network | NLC NATIONAL LEAGUE OF CITIES CITIES STRONG TOGETHER | THE JPB FOUNDATION | ADDITIONAL RESEARCH ON THE BENEFITS OF NATURE AVAILABLE AT research.childrenandnature.org

C&NN recognizes that not all studies support causal statements. SUPPORTING RESEARCH.⁹ Pagels et al. (2014). A repeated measurement study investigating the impact of school outdoor environment upon physical activity across ages and seasons in Swedish second, fifth and eighth graders. *BMC Public Health*, 14(1), 803. ¹⁰ Almanza et al. (2012). A study of community design, greenness, and physical activity in children using satellite, GPS and accelerometer data. *Health Place*, 18(1), 46-54. ¹¹ Hartig et al. (2014). Nature and health. *Ann Rev Publ Health*, 35, 207-28. ¹² Christian et al. (2015). The influence of the neighborhood physical environment on early child health and development: A review and call for research. *Health Place*, 33, 25-36. ¹³ Wolch et al. (2011). Childhood obesity and proximity to urban parks and recreational resources: A longitudinal cohort study. *Health Place*, 17(1), 207-214. ¹⁴ Duncan et al. (2014). The effect of green exercise on blood pressure, heart rate and mood state in primary school children. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*, 11(4), 3678-3688. ¹⁵ Wells & Evans (2003). Nearby nature: A buffer of life stress among rural children. *Environ Behav*, 35(3), 311-330. ¹⁶ Corraliza et al. (2012). Nature as a moderator of stress in urban children. *Procedia - Soc Behav Sci*, 38, 253-263. ¹⁷ Chawla et al. (2014). Green schoolyards as havens from stress and resources for resilience in childhood and adolescence. *Health Place*, 28, 1-13. ¹⁸ Roe & Aspinal (2011). The restorative outcomes of forest school and conventional school in young people with good and poor behavior. *Urban For Urban Gree*, 10, 205-212. ¹⁹ Younan et al. (2016). Environmental determinants of aggression in adolescents: Role of neighborhood green space. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry*, 55(7), 591-601. ²⁰ Chawla (2015). Benefits of nature contact for children. *J Plan Lit*, 30(4), 433-452. ©2016 CHILDREN & NATURE NETWORK

Appendix C – Minnesota Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights

Minnesota Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights

The Minnesota Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights (COBR), introduced by Governor Tim Walz and Lieutenant Governor Peggy Flanagan in August of 2022, outlines fundamental outdoor experiences to which every child in the state of Minnesota should have access. This initiative emphasizes the state's commitment to providing equitable outdoor recreation opportunities and fostering environmental stewardship among children, regardless of where they live, learn, or play and includes the following 15 rights:

1. Experiencing Minnesota’s four seasons.
2. Explore and play outdoors in safe, welcoming and culturally affirming spaces.
3. Splash, play or swim in rivers, lakes, ponds and community pools.
4. Plant a tree and watch it grow.
5. Start or participate in an urban, community or personal garden or farm.
6. Compost and recycle for a healthy environment.
7. Bike, ride or ski on public trails.
8. Camp under the stars and safely build a campfire.
9. Catch and eat a fish.
10. Hike, hunt or forage on public lands.
11. Boat or paddle on one of Minnesota's 11,842 lakes.
12. Participate in outdoor sports and recreational activities.
13. Create art and attend outdoor concerts, festivals and community events centered in nature.
14. Participate in traditions and culturally specific ancestral practices rooted in nature.
15. Protect and preserve the environment for future generations.

As of January 15, 2025, almost 130 partner organizations have signed the pledge in support of the Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights. Partners have developed the COBR Action Plan 2025-2027, which includes a focus on the following priority actions that directly support getting youth in the outdoors:

Primary Priorities

- Elevate nature as a partner for mental health and well-being in schools
- Empower schools and childcare facilities to expand and improve nearby nature spaces
- Identify and coordinate support for getting more children experiencing disadvantages outside

Secondary Priorities

- Develop Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights advocacy and communications tools
- Develop an environmental sustainability and climate resiliency toolkit for public, non-profit and private organizations serving youth

Appendix D – NCLI legislation and grant usage

NCLI Supporting Documents

NCLI Grant Legislation 2024

[84.976 NO CHILD LEFT INSIDE; GRANT PROGRAM.](#)

Subdivision 1. **Establishment.**

The commissioner of natural resources must establish and administer a program to provide grants for outdoor environmental, ecological, and other natural-resource-based education and recreation programs serving youth.

Subd. 2. **Eligibility.**

The commissioner may award grants under this section to public entities or private nonprofit organizations.

Subd. 3. **Priorities.**

In awarding grants under this section, the commissioner must give priority to programs that:

(1) provide students with opportunities to directly experience and understand nature and the natural world;

(2) use a research-based, effective environmental, ecological, agricultural, or other natural-resource-based educational curriculum;

(3) maximize the number of participants that can be served;

(4) serve children with limited opportunities to participate in natural-resource-based outdoor activities;

(5) use public park and other natural resource venues and personnel as a resource; and

(6) commit matching funds or in-kind resources.

History:

[1Sp2019 c 4 art 3 s 23](#)

Funding appropriations and priorities

2019 NCLI grant program established

The original appropriation for NCLI included several different criteria to establish a grant program for youth with several different funding categories:

- \$1.2 million appropriation over the biennium by the Minnesota Legislature for youth programs – one-time appropriation from Heritage Enhancement Account of the Game and Fish Fund (HEA-GFF)

- Multiple funding categories:
 - Natural Resources Education and Outdoor Recreation – 66% of projects funded
 - Fishing, Hunting and Shooting Sports Programs – 21% of projects funded
 - High School Fishing Leagues – 13% of projects funded

Legislative background

In 2021, the appropriation combined priorities under the language of “natural resource education and outdoor recreation” and funding came from the General Fund and Heritage Enhancement Account of the Game and Fish Fund (HEA-GFF). To remain true to the original and continued funding from HEA-GFF, DNR set aside up to 40% of funds for fishing and hunting-related projects

This appropriation continued the success of the previous rounds, but for the first time the Legislature approved the use of 10% of the funding to be allowed for administration, which was critical to support the one full-time position necessary to coordinate the program. Staff coordination was previously being absorbed by FAW through shifts in other programs and positions. Ongoing base funding was also approved, which provided critical consistency to the program. For the 2024 grant round, for the first time, there were not enough eligible applications to fully reach the fishing and hunting program allotment. The remaining funds not used for fishing and hunting projects were added to the funding for natural resource education and outdoor recreation projects.

- \$2,000,000 provided over biennium
 - \$1,000,000 from the State General Fund
 - \$1,000,000 from the HEA-GFF
- Approved base budget of \$500,000 going forward from the HEA-GFF

NCLI Grants Funds Usage by Category

	2024	2023	2022
buses/transportation	40%	31%	15%
camera/tech equipment	4%	6%	13%
education facility/nonprofit fees	16%	6%	3%
education supplies	23%	20%	13%
event/lodging fees, including food	1%	1%	0%
exhibits/signage	1%	1%	0%
grantee wages or curriculum time	32%	30%	13%
hardware	1%	0%	8%
local boat/equipment rental	0%	3%	1%
local parks and recreation fees	4%	1%	3%
NASP purchases	4%	8%	1%
safety equipment/certification fees	10%	11%	0%
scientific supplies	7%	13%	16%
sporting goods	44%	55%	60%
state park fees and rentals	6%	5%	1%
stipends for educators/consultants	18%	8%	0%

training/professional development	4%	3%	0%
translation/interpretation fees	1%	0%	0%

Appendix E – DNR Conservation Agenda

2015-2025 DNR Conservation Agenda

- The 10-year strategic plan known as the DNR’s Conservation Agenda identifies the goal of ensuring Minnesota’s outdoor recreation opportunities meet the needs of new and existing participants so all benefit from nature. Strategies to meet this goal include development and promotion of outdoor programs and activities for people of all backgrounds as well as a commitment to enhancing high-quality, easy-to-access and safe recreational opportunities.
- The DNR is committed to connecting Minnesotans to the outdoors in meaningful ways that will contribute to human health and quality of life. Programs such as I Can! and No Child Left Inside expand DNR’s reach within communities towards meeting this commitment.

Appendix F – DNR programs and participant numbers

Descriptions of current DNR outdoor opportunities for youth

The following is a summary of programs and resources that provide outdoor opportunities offered by DNR's divisions. A breakdown of youth reached annually by each program can be found in Appendix E.

Ecological and Water Resources

Aquatic Education Program – Project WET (Water Education Today)

A network of partners, award winning publications, and quality trainings since the early 1990s. Provides a wide range of hands-on educational, outreach and training opportunities to the public on aquatic resources and watershed issues facing Minnesota communities. The goal is to empower others to connect youth to water resources.

Bird by Bird

Engages elementary students at need-based schools in learning about birds through observation, outdoor hands-on activities, and community science. Schools receive supplies such as bird feeders and binoculars, training for teachers, and visits from DNR volunteers who provide bird expertise and engage the school community. All participants are from Title 1 schools (which qualify for additional federal funds due to the percentage of economically disadvantaged students) that are underserved in outdoor education.

Birding and Outdoor Leadership Development (BOLD)

Provides urban young adults with immersive field experiences and access to natural resource professionals, gaining knowledge of conservation approaches and research techniques. DNR partners with community organizations who work with underrepresented ethno-racial groups to identify participants.

Enforcement

ATV Safety Training

This course (whether in person or online) covers ATV safety, operation, and laws. Required by law for persons born after July 1, 1987, also available for youth 16 or older who want to ride an ATV in Minnesota. For youth ages 10-15 there is a hands-on ATV safety training class.

Firearms Safety Training

To learn the safe handling of firearms, hunter responsibility and wildlife conservation. Participants go through seven scenarios which will allow them to learn and demonstrate commonly accepted principles of safety in hunting and handling of firearms. Required by law for all persons born after December 31, 1979, who want to hunt in Minnesota. Also, classroom and hybrid course for students 11 and older: 12 and older can use apprentice hunter validation; 16 and older can complete firearms safety certification.

Snowmobile Safety Training

This course (whether in person or online) covers snowmobile safety, operation, and laws. Required by law for persons born after December 31, 1976, who want to ride a snowmobile in Minnesota. Also, available to youth 11 to 15.

Watercraft Operator Permit

As a state boating law requirement, youth (12 to 17 years old) complete an online boating safety course to receive a Minnesota water operator's permit. In addition, this course may be required for youth and adults who plan on boating in Canada.

Water Safety Outreach

Water safety education that inspires youth and adults to enjoy and explore the outdoors in a safe and responsible manner. This is done through participation at community events, school field trips, city celebrations, festivals, safety camps and school programs. Includes activities on life jacket safety, swimming safety, how to measure and check ice, and recommended ice safety gear.

Fish and Wildlife

Fishing and Aquatic Resources Outreach

- Fishing clinics – introduce new anglers to the basics of fishing and includes an opportunity to try angling.
- Fisheries Programming – Fisheries staff provide a variety of youth programs including hatchery tours and learn to fish events.
- Free fishing equipment is provided to groups and organizations
- In 2023, YMCA program partners held approximately 250 in-person programs and camp sessions, including aquatic resource and fishing programs at their summer camps. Fifteen summer camp staff were trained by the DNR FAW Outreach Training Coordinator.
 - Specialty camps for 2,544 participants included trips to local fishing spots across the Twin Cities metropolitan area.
- Free fishing weekends including Take a Kid Ice Fishing Weekend and Take a Kid Fishing Weekend allow adults to fish without a license if they take a youth fishing with them.

Fishing in the Neighborhood (FiN)

This program aims to increase angling opportunities within the seven-county metro region. FiN builds on existing urban fisheries management activities such as stocking, aeration and enhancement of shore fishing and pier fishing. This provides fishing opportunities where they otherwise may not exist.

National Archery in the Schools

Offers income agreements and training for schools to teach basic archery skills, which is often taught as part of the physical education curriculum and in after-school settings. Several schools host invitational tournaments throughout the winter season. Students and their coaches may register and qualify for the state championship tournament, which includes significant prizes and scholarships.

Wildlife Outreach

Wildlife staff provide wildlife management area tours and hunting demonstrations. Take a Kid Hunting weekend allows adults to hunt without a license if they take a youth hunting. Wildlife staff also permit special youth deer hunts primarily at state parks.

Forestry

Arbor Month

Provides free tree seedlings from the State Forest Nursery to schools and community groups that plant trees in the spring. Annually 15,000-30,000 seedlings are distributed supporting hundreds of planting events. Events usually involve a group of students and teachers, scout troops, community volunteers, and more. All events are outdoors and hands-on.

Field Forester Outreach Activities

DNR foresters interact with students in their local areas by doing field days, invasive species removal events, and Arbor Month planting events (outdoors).

Project Learning Tree (PLT)

Provides forestry lessons and educational resources through hands-on educator workshops at schools, nature centers, colleges, and universities. Workshops are coordinated by the DNR and often delivered via trained facilitators.

School Forest Program

DNR staff help schools designate forests as outdoor classrooms to get students outside into nearby nature. The DNR advises schools on forest management and provides lessons and resources with most outdoor instruction led by teachers. Currently there are 165 sites that students visit multiple times per year. Teachers reported 48,403 student participants in FY24.

Wildfire Prevention

Events occur during individual school visits (Smokey Bear), field trips to DNR field stations, school field days, and "big wheel events," where students can interact with fire trucks or other equipment.

Parks and Trails

DNR K-12 Interpretive Programs

- Interpretive staff lead K-12 school field trip programming at state parks and trails. Programs include hands-on activities that explore a wide variety of outdoor-related topics. PAT allocates \$15,000/year for transportation grants for schools to attend a naturalist-led program at a PAT unit.
- Public Programming for Families and Mixed Ages
Many public programs are designed for all ages and are largely attended by families with children. They are primarily offered at state parks, state recreation areas, and on state trails, but also include staff outreach at sites within nearby communities. Program topics range from outdoor skills to wildlife to cultural history.

- **Girl Scout Programming**
Programs delivered either as a public program advertised to Girl Scouts, or as part of a program requested by a Girl Scout troop.
- **Aquatic Resources and Fishing Education State Park Interns**
In a partnership between DNR Fish and Wildlife Division and DNR Parks and Trails Division, summer interns are placed in select state parks to introduce park visitors to fishing skills through hands-on programs.

I Can! Program Series

Skill-building programs and overnight experiences introduce families with children and individuals to various forms of outdoor recreation. Hands-on instruction and equipment are provided at all programs.

- **I Can Camp!** overnight programs designed to teach camping skills to people unfamiliar with camping or recreating in the outdoors. Registration includes the use of all necessary camping equipment and hands-on instruction by trained trip leaders.
- **I Can Paddle!** programs provide skill-based instruction on canoeing, kayaking, sea kayaking, and canoe camping. Program formats include two-hour programs, day trips, and overnight trips.
- **I Can Mountain Bike!** programs at Cuyuna Country State Recreation Area teach basic mountain biking skills on a closed skills course followed by a group trail ride on the recreation area's renowned single-track trails.
- **I Can Fish!** programs provide participants with the basics of fishing from shore or a fishing pier. Designed especially for first-time anglers, participants learn all the basics from fish identification to casting.
- **Archery in the Parks** programs are led by interpretive staff at many state parks. Attendees learn how to safely use a bow and arrow and practice with targets. These programs are especially popular with families with children.

Junior Ranger Program

A self-guided program filled with outdoor activities for kids ages 6-10. After completing the activities, kids can earn a special patch from a state park ranger station or visitor center.

Kid Kit Checkout Activity Bags

Many state park ranger stations and visitor centers checkout free activity bags with items to help families explore the outdoors. The bags contain children's books, binoculars, crayons, tools and exploration prompts. Activity topics include Wildlife by Water, Camping Skills and Around the Campfire.

Youth reached through DNR programs – participant numbers

Minnesota DNR Programs that connect youth to the outdoors. E=estimated, A=actual, CY = calendar year

*Program	Number youth reached FY23	Number youth reached FY24	Program delivery take youth outdoors?	How connect to outdoors
ECOLOGICAL & WATER RESOURCES				
Aquatic Education Program – Project WET	16,005 E	12,259 E	Yes/No	Activities indoors and outdoors
Bird by Bird	200 A	200 A	Yes	Outdoor programs
Birding and Outdoor Leadership Development	7 A	35 A	Yes	Outdoor field trips and community events
ENFORCEMENT				
ATV Safety	3,270 A	3,226 A	Yes/No	Youth 11-15 must go outside to complete a hands-on field day, ages 16-17 can choose to take the online course with a virtual field day
Firearms Safety	13,000 A	13,244 A	Yes/No	“ ”
Snowmobile Safety	5,150 A	1,592 A	Yes/No	“ ”
Watercraft Operator Permit	8,431 E	8,722 E	No	“ ”
Water Safety Outreach	890 E	1,150 E	Yes	Outdoor activities at camps, programs, community events, and festivals
FISH & WILDLIFE				
Fishing and aquatic program by DNR Fisheries staff	CY22 – 3,626 (67 programs)	CY23 – 4,788 (73 programs)	Mix of classroom and in the field. Includes adults, but majority are youth	Activities outdoors, numbers included in PAT I Can Fish! & Family/mixed age public programming

*Program	Number youth reached FY23	Number youth reached FY24	Program delivery take youth outdoors?	How connect to outdoors
Fishing and aquatic programs by YMCA instructors trained by DNR	CY22 – 1,897	CY23 – 2,544	Yes	Activities outdoors
Fishing in the Neighborhood	2,520 E	3,089 E	Yes	Most event outside on the lake or ice
Fishing programs by partners that received rods and reels from DNR	CY22 – 3,711	CY23 – 3,924 (135 programs)	Yes, but includes numbers of adults also	Activities outdoors
National Archery in the Schools Program	2,439 A	2,723 A	NO	May go outdoors on own to shoot
FORESTRY				
Arbor Month	4,750 E	3,800 E	Yes	Tree plantings (#s may overlap with school forest #s)
Field Forester Educational Activities	970 E (170 outdoors E)	800 E (645 outdoors E)	Yes/No	Field days, invasive species removal
Project Learning Tree	5,900 E Position Vacant	2,750 E Position Vacant	Yes/No	Activities can occur outside, position being hired/hope to more than double #s from FY23
School Forest	56,187 A** 23,000 E underserved	48,403 A** 21,000 E underserved	Yes	Activities occur school forest (outdoor classroom)
Wildfire Prevention	3,720 E 60%	5,104 E 60%	Yes/No	Activities usually occur outdoors with field days/trips and events
LANDS & MINERALS				
Minn. Minerals Education Workshop	5,400 E	5,400 E	Yes/No	Teachers take students outdoors and connect to resource through education

*Program	Number youth reached FY23	Number youth reached FY24	Program delivery take youth outdoors?	How connect to outdoors
PARKS & TRAILS	Actual Numbers Calendar Year 2022 COVID influence	Actual Numbers Calendar Year 2023		
Archery in the Parks	36 E	36 E	Yes	Activities outdoors
Children Public Programming	2,058 A	6,857 A	Yes	Activities outdoors
Family/Mixed Age Public Programming	81,958 A	150,637 A	Yes	Activities outdoors
Fishing and aquatic ed programs by State Park staff and interns	CY22 – 8,455	CY23 – 6,368	Yes, includes adults/families	Activities outdoors
Girl Scout Programing	180 A	276 A	Yes	Activities outdoors
I Can Camp!	455 E	490 E	Yes	Activities outdoors
I Can Fish!	88 E	102 E	Yes	Activities outdoors
I Can Mountain Bike!	45 E	41 E	Yes	Activities outdoors
I Can Paddle!	255 E	320 E	Yes	Activities outdoors
Junior Ranger Program	3,794 booklets 475 patches	10,335 booklets 2,522 patches	Yes	Activities outdoors
K-12 School Programs	31,448 A	30,197 A	Yes	Activities outdoors
Kids Kit Checkout Activity Bags	271 check out times	238 check out times	Yes	Activities outdoors

*Program descriptions in report.

** Numbers reflect number of students, not the number of student experiences outdoors. Students may be going outdoors weekly or monthly.

Appendix G – Residential environmental learning centers

Residential environmental learning centers

Deep Portage Learning Center

Location: Hackensack, MN

Founded: 1973

Acreage: 6,307

Annual K-12 Students Served: 4,200

Executive Director: Lindsay Bjorklund



Deep Portage’s Story: In 1949, a local forester named Fay Harrington was taking an inventory of tax-forfeited land in Cass County and came through the area that would eventually become Deep Portage. Harrington recognized the land’s unique qualities and became convinced that it had “greater potential and more significance than ordinary forest land.” In the following two decades, Harrington and others with an interest in conservation began to discuss how the land could be used. In 1973, 6,307 acres of Cass County land was officially set aside for public use, education and responsible forestry. Today, the campus includes a 54,000 square foot residential dorm building, interpretive center, observation tower, bog boardwalk and much more.

Eagle Bluff Environmental Learning Center

Location: Lanesboro, MN

Founded: 1978

Acreage: 300

Annual K-12 Students Served: 10,000

Executive Director: Colleen Foehrenbacher



Eagle Bluff’s Story: Following his forestry studies at the University of Minnesota, Eagle Bluff founder Joe Deden spent time in Germany studying how students in that country learned about the environment and nature. He found that it was simple: They learned how to care about the environment by being in nature. Joe returned to Minnesota in 1978 and within two years the nonprofit Root River Hardwood Forest Interpretive Center was created. In the mid-1990s the name was changed to Eagle Bluff Environmental Learning Center and the center started overnight trips for schools.

Long Lake Conservation Center

Location: Palisade, MN

Founded: 1963

Acreage: 720

Annual K-12 Students Served: 4,000

Executive Director: Dave McMillan



Long Lake’s Story: Long Lake Conservation Center became one of the country’s first overnight outdoor schools when it opened its doors in 1963. The center was the brainchild of James Marcum, a DNR officer, who believed that educating the population, particularly the youth, was a better way to preserve our precious natural resources than writing tickets. He joined forces with Bob Burwell from the Department of Fish and Wildlife, and others, to acquire the land from the Minneapolis Kiwanis Club, and construct the center’s first classrooms. Marcum’s mission to promote wise use of natural resources, inspire a deep appreciation of nature and encourage lifelong stewardship of the environment is still at the core of Long Lake’s curriculum.

Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center

Location: Sandstone, MN

Founded: 1969

Acreage: 1,427

Annual K-12 Students Served: 3,000

Executive Director: Bryan Wood



Osprey Wilds’ Story: When Marguerite Schwyzer bequeathed an abandoned farm in rural Pine County to the National Audubon Society in 1968, no one could have predicted that 55 years later, Osprey Wilds would have become an accredited, nonprofit environmental learning center that would grow from 535 to 1,427 acres, annually hosting about 3,000 K-12 students through its outdoor school program, and annually educating thousands more each year through its youth and family camps, post-secondary courses, community and adult programs, as well as overseeing an additional 10,000 students through its network of 40 authorized Minnesota charter schools.

Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center

Location: Finland, MN

Founded: 1971

Acreage: 2,100

Annual K-12 Students Served: 13,000

Executive Director: Peter Smerud



Wolf Ridge's Story: During the week of the first Earth Day in 1970, the idea was crafted by a schoolteacher in Cloquet, Jack Pichotta, to build the first center designed specifically for school children to spend a week of outdoor learning. The Environmental Learning Center opened in 1971 and in 1980 was the first in the nation to be accredited as a school. A move from Isabella to Finland, MN occurred in 1988 and a change of name, the Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center, which has grown to be the largest accredited center in the nation, and a model for development of programs and facilities throughout the world.