

Maryland Partnership for Children In Nature
2015 Action Plan

Background/ Purpose:

The Maryland Partnership for Children In Nature (the Partnership, or CIN) was established by Executive Order in 2008 to develop a vision and recommendations for connecting children and communities to nature. The Partnership works to promote outdoor experiential activities and environmental education for Maryland's youth and their families through a coalition of agencies and organizations focused on providing ongoing support for these efforts.

Maryland is continually enhancing its efforts to ensure that its children grow to become informed and responsible stewards of the environment, prepared for future environmental challenges and opportunities as individual citizens and as members of the workforce.

Partnership work supports the development and implementation of environmental literacy programs in schools, aiding achievement toward state education standards and requirements, and helping to meet the Environmental Literacy outcomes of the 2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement. The Partnership provides a means for public and private entities to work together toward solutions in this arena, and serves as a convener and incubator to help align, coordinate and advance the individual initiatives of the various partners that support the priorities of the group as a whole. Actions of the Partnership may include tasks such as convening conversations to identify needs and solutions to advance stated priorities; making recommendations to help shape policy and practices among stakeholders; representing Maryland's environmental literacy interests in statewide, regional, and national professional arenas; facilitating collaboration among interest groups; and developing planning documents to outline how partners will achieve commitments under the Bay Agreement.

The Partnership also focuses its work on promoting and supporting outdoor time for children and families, to connect with, recreate in and learn about nature; with the ultimate aim of developing children's sense of wonder and fostering citizens' passion for, and understanding and stewardship of natural resources.

Action Plan:

A course of action established in prior years has evolved from a basic organization around four main focus areas:

- (1) communities and community planning, including access to nature;
- (2) health connections (now integrated with community initiatives, and the related agriculture piece is now embedded within community and environmental literacy initiatives);
- (3) supporting environmental literacy in schools and the community; and
- (4) promoting outdoor play and learning (outreach and communications; overarching initiatives).

The intention for each of these areas is described below in *italics*. To continue with ongoing efforts to increase outdoor learning and recreational experiences for Maryland's youth, both in schools and in the community, the Maryland Partnership for Children In Nature plans key actions for 2015, along with any additional actions necessary to support these initiatives and partner efforts [to follow]:

I. Communities, Planning, and Access to Nature

Enhance equitable access to nature and other outdoor opportunities *by incorporating green space as a factor in state and local planning policy and guidance, including recommendations on access issues, nature play spaces and providing natural areas for outdoor play and learning. Elevate the issue of access to nearby nature as a critical part of developing sustainable communities. Promote Nature Play Spaces as alternatives to traditional playgrounds using natural materials and designs that mirror more natural settings, to provide some exposure to nature and associated benefits to child development, within the more built environment. Promote healthy Maryland children through exploring and promoting means to engage communities in health-focused initiatives that increase physical fitness through nature based recreational activities; and by connecting communities to opportunities to grow their own food and/or access locally grown foods.*

A. Park Equity and Access to Nature –

1. Facilitate use of the Park Equity Analysis (PEA) tool to assist decisions on park/green space planning and protection.
 - a) *Complete 2015 Update of Analysis to include trail heads, updated data and new model protocol.*
 - b) *Conduct outreach/ workshops to local parks and planning staff for use of PEA in local Land Preservation and Recreation Planning efforts.*
 - c) *Complete local demonstration project with Prince Georges County using park equity data for incorporation into green infrastructure planning.*
2. Develop policy and planning recommendations that will address gaps and challenges in access issues, to provide more opportunities to more children in more communities.
 - a) *Evaluate access to green space and parks in both revitalization and new development scenarios. Identify barriers, practices and benefits to green spaces as community development tools (e.g., adopt-a-lot programs, green space set aside requirements, climate resiliency benefits, economics of green space).*
3. Proactively promote the above recommendations with specific audiences who are positioned to effect change.
 - a) *Meet with partners and ongoing coalitions to share message and seek feedback on barriers and best practices (e.g., Community Development Corporations, planning directors, economic development officials, etc.).*
 - b) *Host a green space and community development forum to highlight local and national examples of increased access to nearby nature and community development.*
4. Seek stakeholder input regarding children's health connections, diversity and inclusion, and increasing interest in and opportunities for utilizing parks and other natural areas for outdoor learning, discovery, and recreation. Use this input to identify actions to ensue. *[combine this activity with the career-focused action, described below]*

B. Nature Play Spaces –

1. Lead ongoing promotion activities through presentations to groups, growing the website resources, and connecting partners who can develop demonstration projects.
2. Host a third annual workshop for educators, planners, parks personnel, landscape designers, etc.; explore the possibility of coordinating with a related conference in future years.
3. Promote the use of the Land Preservation and Recreation Plan (state and county counterparts) – and the recommendations developed by the Partnership within it – to guide inclusion of nature play spaces and other outdoor nature areas in park facilities.

II. Support for Environmental Literacy

These initiatives focus primarily on working with schools, preK-20, and non-formal environmental education partners; with consideration for linking environmental learning to activities outside of school (through after school programs and community resources). The main objective is to assist and support Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in the development and improvement of their Environmental Literacy Programs (ELP) and implementation of Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences (MWEE). This includes fostering collaboration and connecting school systems with nonformal environmental education (EE) providers, and preparing teachers to provide field experiences for students.

This work also supports the following Chesapeake Bay Agreement Environmental Literacy Outcome:

Continually increase students' age-appropriate understanding of the watershed through participation in teacher-supported, meaningful watershed educational experiences and rigorous, inquiry-based instruction, with a target of at least one meaningful watershed educational experience in elementary, middle and high school depending on available resources.

- A. **Increase student participation** (in terms of quantity and social diversity) in environmental learning, including outdoor environmental experiences through school, and opportunities for additional enrichment, that improves career and college readiness and leads to STEM careers –
 1. Identify, promote and help advance policies, resources, and partnerships that support rigorous student learning experiences outdoors (MWEEs).
 2. Research and promote an environmental careers “pipeline” that increases awareness of environmental and STEM careers, strives for greater inclusion of students from diverse backgrounds, and enables more students to successfully pursue career fields in natural resources. Identify tools and services needed, potential audiences, and partners who can help provide and use these resources to guide students. *[see also forum activity, below]*

- B. **Increase the ability of teachers to provide** sustained environmental learning for their students, including meaningful outdoor experiences:
 1. Assist and support Local Education Agencies (LEAs), schools, and educators with environmental literacy implementation and integration of new practices and standards (MWEEs, STEM, NGSS, etc.)* via promotion, support, and outreach –
 - a) *Continue to connect and support formal and nonformal educators through briefings, professional learning opportunities, professional learning communities, regional meetings, etc.*
 - (1) Provide sessions demonstrating examples of integrated E-Lit/STEM/NGSS at the summer 2015 MSDE College and Career Readiness conferences.
 - (2) Connect formal and nonformal educators through professional development opportunities supported by Chesapeake Bay Program grant to Maryland.
 - b) *Help identify and distribute good models of the integration of E-Lit with STEM/NGSS lessons.*
 - c) *Agriculture and Food Connections: Continue integrating agriculture education into schools and nonformal education venues (through farm-based educators and other resources) as a component of environmental literacy, such as: edible garden inclusion in elementary curricula, field trips to farms, career and technology education (CTE) courses in Environmental Horticulture and other appropriate courses. Support school garden and greenhouse initiatives as a potential community resource.*
 - d) *Contribute to development of the state action plan to achieve Environmental Literacy management strategies set forth under the 2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement, and take on responsibility for implementation of appropriate actions. These actions support outcomes focused on Students (student learning and teacher professional development),*

Sustainable Schools, and Environmental Literacy Planning and tracking progress.

- e) *Continue to work with MSDE to develop the 3-year E-Lit implementation Plan; and align it with CIN annual action plans and Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement management strategies, to promote efficiency and effective achievement of all of these plans.*
2. Enhance environmental learning for students and professional learning for teachers, through assisting and supporting nonformal educators in developing programs that are based on, align with and use current practices and formal education requirements (MWEEs, STEM, NGSS, etc.) to best meet schools' needs.
 - a) *Continue to connect and support formal and nonformal educators through briefings, professional learning opportunities, professional learning communities, regional meetings, etc. – provide opportunities for nonformal educators to become more familiar with new standards and practices, and what teachers are looking for in field experiences and other enrichment programs.*
- C. **Continue working with Institutions of Higher Education (IHE)** to enhance teacher pre-service education to prepare teachers to include instructional strategies for Maryland's Environmental Literacy Standards. This will involve use of the outdoors as a classroom and engaging students in investigative learning. Pursue possible collaboration with University System of Maryland on providing environmental literacy teaching/learning experiences to pre-service and certificated teachers:
1. Focus 2015 on embedded experiences for elementary pre-service teachers to learn the content and pedagogy for teaching the Maryland environmental literacy standards through the Next Generation Science Standards.
 2. Develop grant-funded pilot – interested collaborators include Notre Dame of MD, Mount St. Mary's, Loyola, and Salisbury (to date).
- D. **Promote and support sustainable schools initiatives –**

This work also supports the following Chesapeake Bay Agreement Environmental Literacy Outcome: Continually increase the number of schools in the region that reduce the impact of their buildings and grounds on their local watershed, environment and human health through best practices, including student-led protection and restoration projects.

1. Collaborate with school system wellness councils, PTSAs, and similar entities to embed environmental priorities into their actions [for example, promote more bike racks, walking school buses, outdoor play, etc.]
2. Work with MSDE to develop a statewide Sustainable Schools strategy, involving facilities and instructional staff in the process –
 - a) *Establish a process for expressing support for and distributing information, guidance and resources regarding the inclusion of defined outdoor study areas in building new construction and renovation plans. Use/feature/promote the Maryland School Grounds for Learning project resources through various means.*
 - b) *Plan and host meeting(s) involving school facilities staff and E-Lit points of contact to discuss models for instruction and facilities collaboration.*
 - c) *Identify funding needs and explore potential funding sources such as grant programs and budget requests, to support outdoor study areas on school grounds.*
 - d) *Ensure that MSDE E-Lit Implementation Plan and Chesapeake Bay Agreement strategies include and align with these facilities considerations.*

3. *Maryland School Grounds for Learning* project through MAEOE – support, promote and assist development and distribution.
 - a) *Online Resources: Partners will be asked to collaborate as we build comprehensive online resources to help school communities plan, utilize and sustain a variety of environmental projects on school grounds.*
 - b) *Professional Development: CIN partners will help to promote training offered to teachers, administrators and facilities personnel to encourage school-wide collaboration to effectively design, enhance and use the school grounds with students to learn about the environment and conserve natural resources. Online and in-person training will be available.*

III. Outreach and Communications –

This also encompasses organizing overarching and cross-cutting activities that support and advance Partnership priorities. Develop enhanced communications among the Partnership members to facilitate and advance our work, and to promote initiatives to a wider audience – such as using social media and other outlets, and better coordinating outreach efforts among partners. Explore and pursue opportunities for unique approaches to potentially increasing available funding and policy and/or operational support for priorities identified by the Partnership.

A. Overarching or cross-cutting activities –

1. Intentionally invite additional stakeholders/ potential new partners to participate in all of the above (workgroups, individual initiatives, etc.).
2. Serve as lead entity for coordinating and reporting on activities in support of E-Lit goal and outcomes of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement.
3. Follow up from Transition Recommendations – designate a small group to identify specific funding, policy, and operations suggestions to implement the ideas outlined to support the four recommendations* – and use these as the basis for discussions among decision-makers.

[* Recommendations include: (1) Increase transportation for students to experience natural areas away from school grounds; (2) Increase opportunities for students to engage in outdoor environmental investigations on or near school grounds; (3) Enhance professional development of teachers to support environmental literacy initiatives; and (4) Provide access to green space – safely walkable from home or school – for every child in every community.]

4. Seek stakeholder input regarding children’s health connections, diversity and inclusion, and STEM/environmental careers – convene appropriate group(s) to discuss needs and solutions (possibly one session with two strands, or two separate events) –
 - a) *Convene a gathering of stakeholders, including community leaders, to discuss and seek innovative solutions to increasing interest and opportunities among diverse groups in utilizing parks and other natural areas for outdoor learning, discovery, and recreation that also serves to improve personal health. Use this event to identify actions to ensue. [this supports suggested action under Communities]*
 - b) *Host a forum to address means to enhance interest and success in pursuing environmental careers, including among diverse students – involving and connecting community leaders, school guidance counselors, internship programs (CCC, CJC, MCC, LEAF, Coastal Stewards, etc.), and Institutions of Higher Education. Identify gaps, needs, opportunities for coordination/ collaboration, and develop recommendations for action. [this supports the careers pipeline action under Environmental Literacy]*

B. Promoting Outdoor Play & Learning –

1. Engage in outreach to continue to inform and promote audiences about our priorities, connect to good research and other resources, and coordinate with larger (e.g., Federal) initiatives. *Examples may include:*
 - a) *Include a section on the CIN website for research and information to support CIN priorities, populated with links from partners and others.*
 - b) *Prepare and make available resources, recommendations, and exciting examples for promoting and enhancing use of parks for bilingual, physically challenged, and other special audiences.*
 - c) *Leverage momentum from and help promote appropriate Federal initiatives, at the state level, to build support and create incentives to get kids in local and state parks:*
 - (1) the President's Let's Get Every Kid In a Park campaign – prepare information on National Parks in Maryland that qualify for the funding/ discount and promote visitation; clarify and distribute information on how MD schools can participate.
 - (2) the U.S. Forest Service's Discover the Forest campaign pieces, National Recreation and Parks Association efforts (e.g., Meet me at the Park), and similar.

C. Ongoing activities –

1. Continue to promote professional development opportunities through simple communication means.
2. Foster and facilitate information exchange, networking, and collaboration among educators and other related interests statewide.
3. Participate in and help promote the Annual Maryland Green Schools Youth Summit.
4. Continue promoting/supporting statewide initiatives that provide broad and far-reaching resources for the field of environmental education (e.g., MADE CLEAR [climate change education], Bay Backpack, MD Green Schools Program, etc.).