

Project Green Classrooms

Annual Progress Report – January 2018

The statewide Project Green Classrooms initiative was established in June 2017 by Governor Larry Hogan's Executive Order 01.01.2017.12 [*]. The executive order created a coalition of state agencies and other government and nongovernment partners working to mobilize resources to ensure that Maryland's youth experience, understand, and learn to conserve the natural environment. The initiative was established to promote outdoor activities and environmental education through schools, in communities and on public lands to benefit Maryland's young people. This new group represents expanded membership of a group that had been working in this area previously, and will carry forward some actions while identifying new and exciting opportunities to work with greater capacity and more effectively across state government and among public and private sector partners.

[*] Executive Order 01.01.2017.12

https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MDGOV/2017/06/08/file_attachments/828597/EO01.01.2017.12.pdf

Project Green Classrooms serves as an advisory body, working collectively to identify gaps and barriers, and make recommendations to decision-makers regarding solutions that will bring about change to advance in three main areas:

1. Supporting **environmental literacy** programs in schools;
2. Increasing access to **nearby nature**;
3. Promoting the **use of the outdoors** for learning, discovery, healthy play and career exploration.

The term “green classrooms” can be taken in its broadest sense, to mean all of Maryland as a collection of numerous opportunities to learn about and discover the environment and natural resources, both indoors and outdoors, during the school day as well as outside of school hours at home and in communities. Outdoor experiences are critical to learning about the environment and developing empathy and stewardship, and should be foundational to child development, wellness and academic programs. Because it is often a challenging piece, this initiative will focus additional efforts in the near term on bridging gaps for increasing interactions with the outdoors as an important means to support academic achievement and whole child benefits.

This annual report for Project Green Classrooms as called for in the executive order covers the group's work from establishment in June 2017 through December 2017, and provides a basic outline of the direction for 2018. In this first six months, work has focused on uniting the partners as a team, developing familiarity with the charge and structure as presented in the executive order, and planning for the future.

Planning – Developing the scope of work and annual plan:

Since its establishment, members have taken steps to engage new partners, set its structure, identify shared priorities and begin outlining approaches.

- Each partner has designated participating representatives, to serve on the leadership team (the “voting members”) consisting of higher level authorities from each of the eight state agencies; and the steering committee, with at least one staff person from all member agencies and organizations. The steering committee has met numerous times in the last several months: at regular monthly meetings; additional individual meetings held with each new partner to determine mutually beneficial efforts; an all-day planning meeting focused on visioning and identifying significant action items to pursue; and follow-up meetings working toward establishing the annual work plan and corresponding committees.
- In October, at the first full membership meeting, steering committee members presented draft strategies to the leadership team (voting members) and partners. The 50 partners attending participated enthusiastically in discussions about each strategy to identify needs and opportunities. Input from this event is being used to help refine the group's plans and involve additional colleagues. The strategies, provided below, focus

on describing areas of work that will help organize approaches to answering the following overarching, guiding questions, collectively:

Does every child in Maryland have the means, access, opportunity, knowledge, support, encouragement, desire and inclination to play, explore and learn outdoors – both during and outside of the school day?

1. What can be done to increase the time youth spend outdoors during and outside of the school day?
2. Do enough places exist to experience nature, are they sufficient, and are they in the right locations?
3. Can they get there?
4. How can we do more to build good stewards for the 21st century and prepare youth for life and careers?
5. What are some avenues of outreach that can help with all of the above?

For each of the following strategies, committees are forming to identify specific barriers, challenges, potential solutions and actions to affect change. This will form the basis of the work plan, including specific key actions for each strategy. Each group will be led by a steering committee member and will consist of a combined team of steering committee members, partners and interested parties outside the official membership.

Strategy – ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY AND LEARNING OUTDOORS during the school day:

Partners are engaged in many ongoing activities that support environmental literacy programs in schools. As a main driver this year, we will use the strong relationship between the Next Generation Science Standards and Environmental Literacy standards to recommend best instructional strategies targeting student achievement and environmental stewardship in Maryland. Critical to this goal will be networking key stakeholders and increasing their capacity to integrate environmental learning across disciplines, with the expectation that outdoor learning experiences are fundamental. This work may entail actions such as guiding professional learning, advising instructional content, recommending best practices and more. Stakeholders include but are not limited to: (1) higher education entities such as pre-service and certifying teachers, classroom based educators serving as mentors for interns, and environmental-related departments (environmental studies, conservation, agriculture, etc.); (2) field and classroom-based educators; (3) curriculum writers and program developers; and (4) administrators at various levels.

Strategy – SUSTAINABLE SCHOOLS:

Sustainable schools efforts connect conservation practices, health and wellness policies, and real-world student stewardship experiences with the schoolyard and the school building as learning laboratories. Partners aim to increase the ability of schools to utilize their buildings and grounds as a means for authentic hands-on learning and a place to practice stewardship – toward an eventual culture shift to embrace practices at school and in the community that benefit the environment and human health. We will do this by using the new Sustainable Schools Guide when complete in 2018, [Bay Backpack](#), and online training resources to link school buildings and grounds to curriculum in environmental literacy.

Strategy – HEALTHY OUTDOOR TIME:

Through partnerships, programming and technical support, Maryland Department of Health and partners will work together to encourage healthy outdoor play and learning for all children in Maryland. Health benefits for children are maximized when their outdoor environment is safe, healthy and there is equitable access. More benefits can be realized when planning considers the needs of all children within the context of health and community safety. We will strive to increase awareness of the value of active time outdoors in nature settings for health, wellness and academic success; and make best use of the benefits by combining knowledge, planning and data tools available among the partners, to promote and guide development of safe and inclusive outdoor programming and activities. We will provide recommendations and guidance resources for educators, caregivers, facility managers, local planners and others; identify areas of need in Maryland; and consider avenues to address challenges.

Strategy – GREEN SPACE:

One of the critical pieces for connecting more children and communities to Maryland's natural resources is to increase the quantity, quality and accessibility of green spaces available for exploration, recreation and learning. We will continue to work with local, state and federal agencies, nonprofits and industry representatives to highlight design practices, share tools for green space planning and programming and advocate for incorporation of these policies into long-term planning efforts. We will work with partners to identify needs and build resources to support the design, creation, maintenance and use of green infrastructure including nature play spaces, pocket parks and raingardens, as well as larger parks and public lands. This will include efforts to increase awareness of the value of green space to the economy, human health, education, community building, climate resiliency, and overall ecological benefits as well as future policy recommendations.

Strategy – ACCESS TO NATURE:

To increase children's access to nature, the partners recommend working together to find synergies and develop a set of guidance materials that outline methods and resources for successfully getting children to nature, both during and outside of school hours. Each of the partners have various programs, funding sources, data and mapping resources that can be used to help advance children's access to nature, but they are currently working independently of one another. By identifying potential collaborations, the partners will be more efficient and effective administering current programs; communicating to teachers, administrators and parents about how to take advantage of these programs; identifying where resources are still needed and exploring mechanisms across programs to carry out effective solutions.

Strategy – CAREER PATHWAYS:

The initiative aims to help provide a clearer picture of what green careers look like and to support a robust pipeline into successfully pursuing them. Through connecting numerous environmental career development programs in Maryland, including opportunities in agriculture and less-traditional areas of natural resources conservation, and listening to youth participants, the group is working to identify and address gaps and needs; and is exploring ideas on how to improve the pathway into green jobs and careers in Maryland. Ideas have been identified for tools, resources and other opportunities for collaboration. By continuing to connect the various youth career development programs as a singular community, the group will facilitate intentional strategies to: increase and improve outreach to youth, better communicate and define green careers, strengthen and simplify the pathways between programs, increase diversity and equitable access to these opportunities, strengthen the alignment of program elements with workforce demand; and continue to identify where tools and resources are still needed.

Strategy – OUTREACH:

A communications committee will determine means to increase awareness of the statewide initiative, the work the partners are doing, and the important messages we need to convey to decision-makers and other audiences to promote and build support for outdoor learning, discovery, healthy play and career exploration in Maryland. The committee will create a communications and outreach plan to guide a strategic approach and regular attention to communications as a necessary tool to advance our priority activities and highlight outcomes; and to provide ready access to online resources available among partners.

Strategy – CHESAPEAKE BAY WATERSHED AGREEMENT:

The program will serve as a means to achieve commitments under the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement's Environmental Literacy goal. This goal calls for states to have a comprehensive and systemic approach to environmental literacy that includes policies, practices, funding and tracking metrics. A new two-year action plan for 2018-19 will be developed to address environmental literacy, including actions addressing student/teacher needs, sustainable schools and environmental literacy planning and tracking. The Bay Agreement goal addresses environmental literacy opportunities primarily through formal education, and Project Green Classrooms' work is broader, including connections to nature outside of the school day; however, the common commitments will be developed so that both work plans are in alignment with each other where it is appropriate.

Note – Intentional efforts will be made to infuse into the strategies solutions and recommendations for inclusivity, agriculture and health-related components; and to explore possibilities for funding resources. All of the strategies have multiple components that are cross-cutting, necessitating interaction among agencies, committees, organizations and outside partners. None of the strategies can be addressed in a “silo.”

Accomplishments to date –

While the group has worked to develop a strategic and organized approach, there are many activities simultaneously underway that contribute to making progress on identified priorities. Whereas the work will take many forms in the future with an emphasis on making recommendations and developing guidance and other resources, the group has hosted or partnered on some early events to take full advantage of timing, interest and opportunities to build awareness and engage partners in important conversations. Some notable items include the following in the last half of 2017:

- June – **Play in the Park Day**, sponsored by the Greater Baltimore Children and Nature Network with participation from partners, held simultaneous outdoor nature play events at 25 parks throughout the city to help raise awareness, enthusiasm and comfort among families regarding outdoor nature-related activities.
- July – **Project Green Classrooms kickoff celebration**, held at the Howard County Conservancy, was attended by more than 80 partners and advocates. Member agencies and organizations were recognized, and participants had a chance to begin networking and team building through some activities led by youth participants.
- July – **Green Jobs Listening Session**, held in conjunction with the kickoff, was a successful means to engage current professionals in brainstorming with youth. Inspired by a speakers’ panel of young people who are emerging in green jobs and conservation fields, the large group worked in breakout sessions to develop recommendations for “ideal” career development experiences and best practices. This was a follow-up to a related event held by the group in winter to connect green jobs/conservation career development programs to each other; and another event held at Coppin State University, led by the Greater Baltimore Wilderness Coalition to help connect more young people to these programs, and included a cultural competency workshop.
- September – **PARK(ing) Day**, an effort to raise awareness of parks and other green spaces. This marked the first involvement in this annual global event, now in its 12th year, where citizens, artists, activists and organizations collaborate to temporarily transform metered parking spaces into “PARK(ing)” spaces: temporary public places. Partners across the state supported installation of temporary “parks” to promote increased access for children to nature. Mini parks were staged for the day at Natural Resources, Transportation (Port and State Highway Administrations, and Transportation Authority) and Planning, and at several Howard County Public Schools.
- October – **First full membership and leadership meeting**, held at the Baltimore County Center for Maryland Agriculture with a tour of the facility, presented as an example of making green space available through partnerships among various programs to benefit agriculture, education, natural resources, recreation and more. More than 50 people were involved in providing thoughtful input into the future work of the initiative; and it launched a “reset” for capturing the interest of and engaging leadership-level representatives from state agencies in a new way. Governor’s citations were presented to the steering committee members whose work led to the creation of the program.
- November – The **NatureCity Forum**, spearheaded by the partnership in conjunction with the Greater Baltimore Wilderness Coalition and several regional organizations, was held at Cylburn Arboretum in Baltimore. This one-day exploration of green infrastructure was well attended by over 110 designers, practitioners, planners and advocates. The day included notable speakers presenting inspiring ideas; local,

regional and national case studies; as well as tools and research on the planning and implementation of green infrastructure for climate resiliency, community building, human health and ecological benefit.

- **Maryland Green Schools** – This statewide program now in its 18th year is a key entity and barometer of success among schools in implementing practical actions that support environmental literacy programs. In 2017, 560 schools were certified in Maryland, or 25 percent of the approximately 2,200 public and independent schools. Students in grades preK-12 participate in stewardship projects inside school facilities, outside on school grounds and in their communities. Students’ projects include astounding collective total achievements in water conservation and bioretention, wildlife habitat and native plant installations, streambank stabilization, stream cleanups, energy conservation, establishing no-idling zones for cars/buses, composting, recycling, growing vegetables, building outdoor classrooms and more. All of these efforts are supported in various ways by the environmental education community which the Project Green Classrooms Initiative involves and represents. The school year culminates with the annual Youth Summit, held at Sandy Point State Park, this year involving 3,000 students from across Maryland.

Upcoming milestones –

- 2018-19 Work Plan – A one- or two-year outline of priorities and actions will be completed in alignment with the 2-year Environmental Literacy action plan for the Chesapeake Bay Program, below.
- 2018-19 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement Environmental Literacy 2-year action plan:
 - Feb. 8, 2018: Mid-Atlantic Environmental Literacy Workgroup provides update to Chesapeake Bay Program Management Board regarding progress achieved by the jurisdictions on the 2016-17 action plan. Staff coordinators from Maryland Department of Natural Resources and Maryland State Department of Education are the lead representatives for Maryland on the workgroup; additional members are also involved.
 - March - April 2018: Using feedback from Management Board and input from the environmental education community, members will develop a new 2-year action plan.
 - Early May 2018: New 2-year action plan due to Chesapeake Bay Program. This plan will align with the program’s environmental literacy actions for the same time period.
- Full membership / leadership meetings – locations tba:
 - May 9 – focus on presentation of the final work plan and actions underway;
 - Oct. 17 – progress reports to date from committees, in preparation for annual report.

Looking forward –

Project Green Classrooms members are enthusiastically committed to the mission. Advancing environmental literacy among Maryland youth serves academic goals while providing health and wellness benefits through increased interactions with the natural environment. Environmentally literate young people are more equipped to become good stewards influencing environmentally sound decisions, while learning 21st century workforce skills and leading Maryland’s “green” economy.

The steering committee and partners statewide have been energized and feel a sense of accomplishment about the establishment of the governor’s executive order itself, as it was the result of action on the part of many in this group, after a significant amount of thoughtful work and collaboration. The executive order serves to validate the importance of environmental literacy and connecting young people to Maryland’s natural treasures; and has offered an opportunity to establish an important role for Project Green Classrooms and its many partners in shaping how our schools and communities provide this for our state’s youngest residents.