



**Nomination for Premier's Board of Education Award
for Innovation and Excellence:**

Outdoor Learning in Prairie Spirit School Division

*Connecting to the natural world contributes to a child's mental,
physical, emotional and spiritual health and well-being.*

*Through outdoor learning opportunities, we are meeting our students where they
are at by providing what they need and supporting them in where they can go!*



Prairie Spirit School Division

Prairie Spirit School Division is the learning-centered rural and urban school division surrounding the City of Saskatoon. Prairie Spirit covers a wide geographic area: north to Leask, south to Hanley, east to Colonsay and west to Perdue. The school division includes nine Hutterite colonies, three First Nations communities, towns, villages and the cities of Warman and Martensville.

The Division's 12,000 students are served by a team of over 1,300 professionals and support staff. Led by our dedicated staff, our students are achieving at high levels and our graduation rates are among the highest in the province.

Vision: Learners for Life

Mission: Inspiring a lifelong love of learning

Board Chair: Bernie Howe

Director of Education: Tracey Young

Division website: www.spiritsd.ca

Introduction

Definition of Outdoor Learning

“**Outdoor Learning** is a broad term that includes: outdoor play in the early years, school grounds projects, environmental education, recreational and adventure activities, personal and social development programmes, expeditions, team building, leadership training, management development, education for sustainability, adventure therapy... and more. Outdoor Learning does not have a clearly defined boundary but it does have a common core...” ([Institute for Outdoor Learning, 2023](#))

In Prairie Spirit School Division, teachers engaging in outdoor learning with their students purposefully embed their outdoor time into the school day, using their outdoor spaces to reach and enhance the learning of curricular outcomes.

Experiencing nature enhances a child’s sense of wonder and joy in the world around them. This is true whether in large urban centres with small patches of green space, gardens and trees or in vast fields and forests. Outdoor learning has the capacity to improve the lives of our students. While this approach includes Indigenous perspectives, this is not the same as land-based learning, which requires following specific criteria.



Taking risks is also an important part of outdoor play. This might be climbing a tree, running very fast, playing near water, playing hide-and-seek in the park, or play-wrestling. When children are given a chance to take developmentally appropriate risks while playing, they can learn to:

- build their judgment and how to stay safe
- evaluate and handle risk
- become more self-confident and independent
- better control their actions and behaviour

Benefits:

- Children who play outside and in nature are more likely to care about the environment.
- Outdoor play can improve children’s mental health. Contact with nature reduces stress, boosts mood, and can protect against anxiety later in life.
- When children play outside, they are more physically active than when they play indoors.

Unintentional benefits from Outdoor Learning:

- Critical thinking
- Self-regulation
- Confidence
- Risk taking
- Problem solving
- Regulation
- Supporting mental health for both teachers and students
- Sense of value and belonging
- Support from parents
- Family engagement
- Excitement, curiosity, wonder and joy
- Develops coordination, agility, balance, and dexterity

Innovative nature of the program or project

A growing body of research suggests that connecting to the natural world contributes to a child's mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health and wellbeing. Providing daily opportunities for students to explore, care for and interact with the natural world helps to strengthen these connections.

As we come to better understand the benefits of outdoor learning, Prairie Spirit teachers are adapting their teaching practices to ensure students have every opportunity to benefit from outdoor learning.

Outdoor learning is a fresh approach based on new tools, technologies and arrangements. Technology for outdoor learning is often brand new to children and includes the following items:

- Ratchet straps
- Tarps
- Paracord
- Saws
- Hammers
- Snippers
- Hand drills
- Compasses
- Bug Viewers

Children gain many lifelong skills as they engage with the "new to them" technology.

Teacher testimonial:

"In the forest, I see children playing with one another who would not typically interact indoors. Gender roles seem to fade away as there are no societal pre-determined areas



such as the kitchen area versus the construction area. The forest allows all children to participate in a way that is meaningful for them.

Holistic opportunities exist within everything that we do as we are always working with motor skills, language, cognitive skills, social/emotional development and the wonders that the land can offer us. The land is where we are naturally meant to be and so the nuances within the environment create the differentiation each learner seeks.”

Sample Lesson Plan:

- Mini lesson (10 minutes): Students meet together in a designated spot to read a story and share the day's lesson aligned to one or more curricular outcomes.
- Outcome expectations (5 minutes): Provide the students the lesson goal for demonstrating their understanding connected to today's lesson.
- Safety check-in and reminders (5 minutes): Go over the rules and boundaries for our outdoor learning time.
- Student work time (60 minutes): While the teacher is circulating to document observations, conversations and product, the teacher is also facilitating student learning by asking questions and providing feedback.
- Sharing circle (10 minutes): Students gather together in the designated spot to share their learning, give thanks for their natural space.

Evidence of direct board influence and participation in the innovation

The Board of Education supports this approach for student learning and demonstrates its support in its budget plan. The Board developed its Strategic Planning Framework with a focus on mental health and wellness. Outdoor learning is a strong strategy to support the Board’s goals for mental health and wellness for students and staff.

Sustainability of the innovation within the present system or school

This innovation will be sustainable with the leadership of the Division’s master teachers in outdoor learning who can assist other teachers in developing their own outdoor learning programs at their schools. Teachers are on a continuum in this area, and those with more experience can support those who are learning about this approach.

Supporting teachers in exploring this innovative approach will be very important. To create an effective outdoor learning environment, teachers require a strong understanding of the curriculum so they can connect guiding questions. In addition, teachers must understand the purpose of taking learning outdoors.

A strong outdoor learning program requires clear communication with families and boundaries for the classroom’s outdoor learning space. The program must also ensure safe practices and appropriate supplies for all students, following Division guidelines.



This innovation will be sustainable because it supports the Division’s new strategic plan, with a focus on student and staff mental health.

Curricular alignments for outdoor learning that support sustainability:

- Supports student achievement of the Broad Areas of Learning – lifelong learner; sense of self, community and place; engaged citizens
- Supports Cross-curricular Competencies by developing thinking, identity and interdependence, literacies and social responsibility
- Achieves outcomes and indicators through activities that are purposeful, dynamic, fulfilling, and authentic
- Provides opportunities for student inquiry, encourages social responsibility, and invites self reflection
- Aligns with assessment for learning, as learning and of learning – through observations, conversations and products – shared through documentation, learning stories, continuums
- Aligns with every goal in the Provincial Education Plan - mental health and well-being, reading and learning response priorities

Client support for the innovation

Student

"You can learn so much from the outdoors. It's a nice place to be to calm down."

- Grade 4 student

"Being in nature makes me feel calm and excited. It's not loud outside and that makes me calm."

- Grade 1 student

"I feel good because I like looking at something that's alive and looking for it the next day."

- Grade 1 student

"Do we have to go inside? I want to stay at forest school!"

- Kindergarten student

"I feel happy when I build with nature."

- Grade 1 student

"It makes me happy because I do hard work."

- Grade 1 student

"We learn to share materials, to cook with nature, and make friends."

- Grade 1 student

"We learn science like learning about nature, we can mix mud and snow to make new things, when trees aren't healthy, we help them with vinegar, we learn how to help trees."

- Grade 1 student

"Building forts makes your brain healthier because your brain has more knowledge."

- Grade 1 student



“When we climb, we might see math in trees like colours, patterns, the view is bigger, you can count how high you are, and the clouds can be a pattern.”

- Grade 1 student

Teachers

“Facilitating Outdoor Learning with my Grade 2s has been an incredibly wonderful experience. Among so many other things, guiding my students to learn in and connect with nature has also changed me. This has been an incredible journey of personal awareness and growth.”

- Sharlene, Grade 2 teacher

“Students are able to regulate throughout the day, they learn in a hands-on way that meets their individual needs and have the freedom to move and explore. Children learn skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, and communication. They develop self-confidence, gross motor, fine motor skills, and their social emotional well-being is supported.

Students find joy being outside and have a deeper connection to the world around them. The curriculum pairs so well to student interests and we can uncover the curricular goals in a way that is authentic and meaningful to students. I personally am passionate about nature play and it has benefited my mental health and my love of learning alongside each child.”

- Meg, Grade 1 teacher

“Why take our learning outside? Besides the many health benefits, exploring outdoors helps us make authentic connections to the curriculum, such as daily and seasonal changes, using our senses to explore the world around us, working through and resolving conflict and building relationships, and thinking about our environmental impact. With so many of our learning goals focused on nature, it makes sense to me that the best way to achieve those is by going outside.”

- Andrea, Grade 1 teacher

“When my students learn outside, they are exploring and connecting information by transferring their ideas and skills into new understanding of the world around them through hands on experiences. A collective respect for their space, plants, animals and people that live in it develops as we build our community of outdoor learners. The outdoor experiences we have continue to be talked about throughout the year, these moments stuck with my students because they were excited and engaged in what we were learning!”

- Kelly, Grade 1 and 3 teacher



Parents

“Having my child currently in a class that goes outdoors, he is motivated, focused, wants to learn, and wants to go back.”

- B.'s mom

“C absolutely loves Forest School. She is always the first one dressed and ready for outdoor play, any temperature. I must share that C speaks very highly of her teachers and friends, looks forward to school every day. Did I mention fresh air is excellent for mental health and a chance for kids to get off screens,

enjoy quality play, Mother Nature and fresh air. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for exposing my girl to her Cree language. She is learning so fast.”

- Mom of Grade 1 student

“They have more confidence in the world around them and the way their body moves in nature and with nature. Also, a respect for the world around them. Every day the most important part of their day is forest school. They often have learned the most from forest school as well.”

- E.'s mom

“I think being outside gives [students] the opportunity to learn in a stress-free environment and takes them away from the confining four walls of a classroom. It invites imagination and creativity into their work.”

- R.'s mom

Partnerships in support of the innovation

- Professional Development offered by Prairie Spirit’s master teachers in the area of Outdoor Learning
- [SaskOutdoors - Connecting the people of Saskatchewan to the outdoors](#)
- [Wildernook](#)
- [ParticipACTION - Home - ParticipACTION](#)
- [Welcome to Take Me Outside! Take Me Outside](#)
- [1000 Hours Outside](#)
- [STF Professional Learning - Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation](#)

Evidence of improved student achievement

Outdoor learning provides an environment in which the teacher can set high expectations for each student and nurture learning experiences that are academically, intellectually, and personally challenging.

The outdoors is relevant to all learners as we need to learn about our earth and all that it has to offer. We need to become stewards and caregivers to the land if we expect it to last for many generations to come. Being on the land in the place where we live, learn and play creates awareness about all that exists around us as well as the needs. We can then take real time actions to support our place which creates thoughtful and engaged citizens.

“I find that in the forest, it is truly a holistic approach as we are using our cognitive, physical, spiritual and social skills all at the same time. This allows all children to enter the forest with many areas of expertise to share with the rest of us.

Students that do not always thrive indoors are often the leaders outdoors as they feel at peace working and playing in a world of balance. Being outdoors I have more family engagement as they don’t feel a need to leave as there is



no silent start or finish. We are always collaborating and so they too join in as do passing community members.”

- Tirzah, Kindergarten teacher

Science

In the outdoor classroom, students and teachers encounter a world of living things (trees, plants, birds, insects, animals), a world of weather, wide open spaces, sky, earth, water, rocks, soil and sand. It’s easy to see how science topics are a natural fit for outdoor learning. The natural environment provides opportunities for students to investigate, analyze and assess life science, physical science, Earth and space science outcomes, especially in Kindergarten through Grade 3.

“By observing the robin’s nest in our forest’s tree, students were able to observe and record the life cycle of a bird. As the mam fed her young chicks, we analyzed how animals interacted with their environment to meet their basic needs. We connected our observations to how birds in the fall adapted to the seasonal changes. These were authentic experiences that met these curricular outcomes: LT1.1, LT1.2, SE1.2, DS1.2.”

- Kelly, Grade 1 teacher

“As we inquire into why trees are important and how they help us understand our own impact on the environment, a couple of my Grade 1 students have begun to look for ways we can take care of our space. They brought some debris they found after the snow melted to show our class and shared their ideas for how we can be good stewards of the earth and how our actions impact those around us. The time we have spent outdoors throughout the year has helped them to develop a meaningful relationship with nature, and consideration and appreciation for the land we get to learn on and from. Curricular outcomes: DR1.3, SI1.2”

- Andrea, Grade 1 teacher

“Recently we were out pond dipping for outdoor learning, it was a hot day and we had to travel across our school yard and through another field to get to the pond and large hill next to the pond. Before we explored, we went over the rules for safety and respecting the land we were visiting.

The students noticed the steep slopes of the hill that we like to run up and down and they reminded each other, "we need to put the pylons up there so we know how far we can go and not play near the edge." "Yeah, and wait for them (other students) to come up the hill before running down so you don't crash." Another student added, "be quiet around the pond so we don't scare the animals, like the snake we saw last time." Students demonstrated their knowledge of safety.



After a while we began our play and exploration and students put into practice their understanding of safety and respect. On the way back, students were hot and sweaty, we decided to stop in the shade to cool off and have some water. I overheard students talking about how important it was to drink water when it is hot outside, "We should always bring our water out with us so we can cool down, I get so thirsty when I'm boiling hot."

These experiences were real life opportunities to learn about not only safety and respect but also what we need to support ourselves in the changing seasons.” Curricular outcomes: USCK.2, APK.1

- Haylee, Kindergarten teacher

“Our love of cooking expanded into making potions. We connected our learning to medicines and learned about the sacred medicines in the medicine wheel. We explored Indigenous values of taking care of our whole self. “We are making medicine. The recipe is water, mud and ice!”” Curricular outcomes: USC1.1, DR1.2, DR1.3, RW1.1, HC1

Literacy development

- Natural materials can be used as the inspiration or props for a wide range of imaginative play and story telling:
- development of oral language and an awareness of elements of stories such as characters and beginning, middle and end.
- Drawing, mark making and writing in the dirt using sticks
- Pattern making using natural materials such as sticks, rocks and leaves
- Development of story writing, use of symbols and writing in reflective journals and learning experiences based on experiences in nature

Language development

- Negotiating, problem solving and sharing of ideas during play
- Story telling, singing, chants and rhymes shared throughout the day
- Development of skills for sharing ideas, feelings and understandings using language and representation in play
- Development of vocabulary through inquiry and exploration

Supporting resources:

[Strategic Plan Framework \(spiritsd.ca\)](https://www.spiritsd.ca/strategic-plan-framework)

[Strategic Plan graphic \(spiritsd.ca\)](https://www.spiritsd.ca/strategic-plan-graphic)

[Prairie Spirit Board of Education 2021-22 Annual Report - PKG.pdf \(spiritsd.ca\)](https://www.spiritsd.ca/prairie-spirit-board-of-education-2021-22-annual-report-pkg.pdf)

[My Prairie Spirit Classroom document](#)

[My Prairie Spirit Classroom – graphic](#)

References

Hanscom, A. J. (2016). *Balanced and barefoot: how unrestricted outdoor play makes for strong, confident, and capable children.* [United States], New Harbinger Publications.

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass.* First edition. Minneapolis, Minnesota, Milkweed Editions.

Saskatchewan Curriculum - www.curriculum.gov.sk.ca

The Benefits of Outdoor Play



Canadian experts from 14 organizations reviewed the best available evidence and released a Position Statement that **access to active play in nature and outdoors—with its risks—is essential for healthy child development.** They recommend **increasing children's opportunities for self-directed outdoor play at home, at school, in the community and in nature.** *Learn more at <http://bit.ly/position-on-play>*

Source: Participaction