



## Maryland Outdoor Learning Partnership (OLP) Access to Nature Working Group Meeting Minutes

Date and Time: Monday, April 21, 2025, 2:00 – 3:30 PM

### Attendees

Rick Garber (Working Group Co-Chair), Chris Wheedleton (Working Group Co-Chair), Stephanie Tuckfield (OLP Co-Chair's Designee), Jo Anne Murray, Kristen Komlosy, Karen McDonald, Katie Dell, Katrina Jones, Michelle Hickerson, Olivia Wisner

### Welcome & Meeting Began at 2:05

### Guest Speakers

- Bob Powell, Clemson University
- Kelley Anderson, Marc Stern, and Paige Crane, Virginia Tech

### Presentation: Barriers to Participation in Outdoor Learning

- There are a variety of documented benefits of outdoor learning including:
  - o Environmental literacy
  - o Academic learning
  - o Personal development
  - o Social development
- Despite the documented benefits of outdoor learning, there are still a variety of barriers that prevents participation. These barriers are complex, interrelated, dynamic, and context dependent.



- Barriers to participation include:
  - o **Spatial:** availability and distribution of opportunities.
  - o **Affordability:** direct costs associated with participation (ex. transportation, financing, time, and logistics).
  - o **Suitability and acceptability:** opinions, attitudes, and beliefs regarding the effectiveness and usefulness of participation.
  - o **Accommodation:** failure to meet psychological, social, physical, and emotional needs of participants and parents.
- **Spatial barriers:**
  - o National trends show that schools serving rural white, tribal nations, and students eligible for free and reduced meals had the least spatial access to outdoor learning opportunities. Urban schools tend to be faced with other types of barriers.
  - o Maryland has a high degree of variability in spatial access to outdoor learning.
- **Affordability barriers:**
  - o Resources available to charter buses or the availability and time constraints of using a school's buses during the school day.
  - o Availability to engage in outdoor learning based on the constraints of the calendar of the school year/ school day. Responsibilities of students and adults that prevent them from being off campus after the school day. Teachers and administrators are responsible for planning and coordinating an outdoor learning experience on top of their regular duties.
- **Suitability & acceptability barriers:**



- Teachers and administrators can be unfamiliar with available programs. This barrier is exacerbated by faculty and administrative turnover.
  - A centralized database where teachers can explore available outdoor learning opportunities is a potential solution (ex. Outdoor School Washington).
  - On average, schools are willing to travel within a 1-hr driving radius
- Curricular demands including a highly prescribed curriculum and preparation for standardized testing can give the impression that outdoor learning is “something extra.” This misconception is in conflict with existing research that shows a positive relationship between outdoor learning experiences and academic achievement.
  - Developing relationships and a positive class climate is a driver of teacher interest in field trip experiences.
- Formal practices in narrow disciplines presents a barrier to integrating interdisciplinary and experiential education.
- Traditional training does not prepare teachers to facilitate outdoor learning and use of the experience once the class returns to the classroom.
- Fostering relationships with champion teachers and administrators can influence the suitability and acceptability of outdoor learning.
- Actual or perceived risk of problems with managing student behavior.
- Concerns regarding safety and security of students.

- **Accommodation barriers:**

- Providers may be unprepared to serve students who would need specialized services to participate (ex. ESL services, physical accessibility).



- Cultural factors related to obtaining parental permission to participate in outdoor learning or overnight residential experiences.
  - The program may not appear relevant to the lived experience of the students, parents, and teachers.
  - Perceived, historical, or actual prejudicial treatment based on race, ethnicity, or sexual identity.
  - Inequitably access to opportunities and resources.
- Considerations:
  - Barriers are complex and interrelated. There are often multiple barriers affecting participation in outdoor learning.
  - Barriers change over time due to factors like staffing turnover, funding changes, population and generational changes, and parenting norms.
  - Each school and population is unique. This requires that providers engage in consistent listening, relationship building, marketing, and outreach.

## Presentation: Oregon ODS Programming Overview

- Oregon has a long history of outdoor school similar to Maryland traditionally in middle school (ex. Arlington Echo).
- History of Oregon Funding for Outdoor School
  - By the 1980's 75% of Oregon's students were having a one-week overnight program but by 2007 fewer than half of students had access to outdoor school.
  - In 2014, stakeholders in Oregon formed a coalition to study the causes of the drop. In 2016 there was a ballot measure to fully fund outdoor school with lottery proceeds.



- 2018 – present = full funding (\$60 million request for 2025-2027)
- One implementation strategy for Outdoor Learning doesn't work across the state. Instead, Oregon has a variety of models to implement outdoor school. These include:
  - Regional Educational Service District (ESD) model
  - Agency partner model
  - Science/ environmental nonprofit model
  - Individual school model
  - Graduate student model
- Barriers in Maryland: inconclusive data about where we are right now, professional development for teachers (including how to utilize newly implemented outdoor classrooms).
- The success in Oregon has required a real financial commitment from the State to fully fund outdoor school opportunities.

### **Discussion:**

- Did the Oregon "Outdoor School Bill" (SB 439) make Outdoor School mandatory in their state?
  - No, it addressed some of the barriers to participation through funding available for schools to offer outdoor school and a coordination arm that can address the other barriers.
- Do we have the data we need from each school district?
  - Environmental Literacy Indicator Tool (ELit) Data, 23 of the 24 Maryland school districts respond



- Do we understand the budgets of school districts to know if they're implementing outdoor learning "in-house?"
  - o Rick Garber is doing a state tour to talk to each school district to understand that better and discuss barriers. Suggestion to connect with facilities staff on that tour.
  - o Chris Wheedleton is interested in reviewing the ELit data to compare that to his understanding of what's being done in his county.
- Maryland State Department of Education, Office of School Facilities, encourages the use of school grounds for outdoor learning.
- What's the difference between Outdoor Learning and Outdoor School?
  - o Outdoor learning = environmental education broadly
  - o Outdoor school = multi-day, overnight programs, that are aligned to curriculum and include social emotional development.
- Are there actions at the state level that facilitate the benefits or address the barriers that our presenters shared?
  - o Oregon developed an "evaluation" to advanced agreed upon, desired outcomes. The design of their evaluation defined outcomes that align with the benefits of outdoor learning. This evaluation prevents providers from assuming certain outcomes without deliberately designing for them in their programming.
  - o Washington is developing a similar evaluation which includes identifying the cross-cutting outcomes that all outdoor schools should seek to achieve. A variety of stakeholders were involved in that process.
    - o Once you collaboratively define outcomes it moves the nature of programming.



- Clemson and Virginia Tech collect that evaluation data and provide confidential reports back to the providers. They also support a learning network of outdoor school program providers collaborate.
  - Oregon has a similar learning network out of the Oregon State Extension.
- Where is Maryland compared to other states with respect to outdoor learning?
  - Maryland's commitment to outdoor learning is obvious through the Environmental Literacy Standards and Governor Moore's creation of the Maryland Outdoor Learning Partnership.
  - Where are we in reality of service to Maryland's youth? Unclear. Difficult budget climate.
- What are the main barriers to outdoor learning in Maryland?
  - Better data to understand implementation.
  - More connected provider network to facilitate shared learning.
- Charter school movement defined matrices that outlined the process of implementation.
- Budgets to support Outdoor Learning in Maryland Schools
  - Baltimore County has school district staff to support outdoor learning. Baltimore County is experiencing a 126-million-dollar shortfall as a district.
  - NorthBay is a public-private partnership. Established by MSDE and DNR. NorthBay raises revenue by offering a retreat program.
- Funding mechanisms for implementation of outdoor learning vary state by state. We should be looking at the success and challenges associated with each funding model.



- Garrett County used Pass Through Grants to support their Outdoor Learning.
- Network of Outdoor Learning service providers could be strengthened to coordinate funds for transportation.
  - o MAEOE could be a potential convener.
  - o We have a strong provider network in Maryland and most likely have the capacity to serve every student but there needs to be more coordination.
- Financial times feel hard to advance environmental literacy in Maryland but the political times feel right.

**Action Items for Working Group:**

- Digest the information shared by guests so that we're prepared to talk about draft recommendations next month.

**Meeting Closed at 3:30**