

Project Green Classrooms 2018 Strategies

The strategies below are under development and focus on describing areas of work that will help organize approaches to answering the following overarching, guiding questions, collectively:

[Guiding Questions] 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 Project Green Classrooms 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 (baybackpack.com), 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 range 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:

Project Green Classrooms 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:

Project Green Classrooms 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.”
