



OUTDOOR LEARNING: THE "OWLS" PROJECT

This Fall, in partnership with the Canadian Ecology Centre (CEC), the Near North District School Board initiated a pilot program with the intention of delivering interdisciplinary outdoor learning experiences to Primary students. The program has now been named "*Outdoor Ways of Learning and Sharing*" or simply - "OWLS".

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PROMOTING ACHIEVEMENT & WELLBEING

The Canadian Ecology Centre, the North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit and the Near North District School Board worked collaboratively to ensure the success of the OWLS initiative - *resulting in rich learning experiences for both educators and students.*

The Near North District School Board is committed to offering students rich learning experiences both in the classroom and beyond. Outdoor education brings learning to life - with abundant opportunities to advance curricular learning in real-world, authentic contexts! A [recent study](#) has shared evidence that "nature may promote learning by improving learners' attention, levels of stress, self-discipline, interest and enjoyment in learning, and physical activity and fitness."

Collaboration between the Near North Program Team, CEC Outreach and Program Coordinator Heather Dabrowski, and staff from the North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit, has resulted in educators from four elementary schools participating in the Outdoor Ways of Learning and Sharing (OWLS) pilot project.

This pilot project has enabled each participating class to engage in a sequence of outdoor learning experiences, allowing students to access outdoor learning spaces within walking distance of their school grounds.

The North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit staff developed a program assessment framework that has supported regular cycles of monitoring and evaluation.

Educator participants and Program staff have noted an increase in positive social behaviours amongst children and positive peer relationships. Furthermore, learning activities have enabled students to develop early literacy and mathematics behaviours while exploring the natural environment. Students often write about their experiences - sharing their thinking in journals and stories. Second language learning in the outdoors has proven to be highly engaging for students – providing authentic contexts to apply new vocabulary. Furthermore, parent engagement and participation has continued to grow, with many parents now actively involved in the OWLS experience.

The OWLS program will continue to grow educator capacity to sustain regular and repeated outdoor learning experiences for students – engaging in practices that inspire curricular learning and social/emotional growth while safely accessing outdoor spaces.