



## **Long-Term Plan for Outdoor Learning**

**To:** Program and School Services Committee

**Date:** 5 May, 2021

**Report No.:** 05-21-4080

### **Strategic Directions**

- Transform Student Learning
- Create a Culture for Student and Staff Well-Being
- Provide Equity of Access to Learning Opportunities for All Students
- Allocate Human and Financial Resources Strategically to Support Student Needs

### **Recommendation**

It is recommended that:

1. The TDSB's current model for outdoor education be restructured to provide instructional support in schools while ensuring that all staff and students have access to resources made available through the TDSB's Outdoor Education Centres; and
2. Investments in school ground infrastructure be prioritized based on the guiding principles and priorities outlined in this report.

### **Context**

On December 9, 2020, the Board directed staff to present a report to the Board of Trustees outlining a long-term plan for encouraging and supporting all schools to use outdoor spaces for instructional time throughout the day. See Appendix A for the details of the Board's decision.

The following report outlines a long-term plan for encouraging and supporting outdoor learning for all schools, organized into two parts. Part A outlines the provision of instructional supports for schools, and Part B proposes guiding principles and priorities for investing in school ground infrastructure.

## **Part A: Enhancing teaching and learning in the outdoors**

Outdoor spaces, including school grounds and local green spaces, offer infinite opportunities for authentic teaching and learning to take place. Through both the EcoSchools program and Toronto Outdoor Education Schools (TOES), the TDSB has demonstrated a longstanding commitment to learning in the outdoors.

To ensure outdoor learning is supported and sustained in the long-term, a restructuring of the TDSB's current model for outdoor education is proposed which reflects pre-amalgamation structures, through the following:

### *1. Instructional support for schools with barriers to outdoor learning*

To further support schools experiencing barriers to taking learning outdoors, up to six priority schools will be identified by Superintendents in each Learning Centre to receive enhanced professional learning for teaching staff. Teachers assigned to Outdoor Education will lend their expertise to help build teacher capacity through co-planning instruction in the outdoors, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and system-wide professional learning. This work will share similar principles promoted through the outdoor play and learning (OPAL) program. Refer to Appendix B for more details on OPAL.

TDSB support to schools would focus on the creation of curriculum-connected learning opportunities which support hands-on, experiential opportunities for student voice and choice through exploration, free play and inquiry. This may include the use of loose parts but will move beyond unstructured times of recess and lunch. The focus will be on supporting instruction so that learning inside and outside the classroom are seen as seamless and essential parts of student learning each and every day.

Selected schools will be prioritized based on the Learning Opportunity Index (LOI), diverse and racialized student populations, access to outdoor spaces and perceived barriers to outdoor learning.

### *2. Reorganization of TOES program delivery model*

A reorganization of the TOES program delivery model is recommended to provide schools with equitable access to programming opportunities. This would support greater access and choice of programming to meet classroom needs and not limit schools to selected sites.

Teachers in the Outdoor Education Department will be attached to identified schools and will develop and deliver professional development to the system to support curriculum-connected outdoor play and learning. These teachers will also work to connect programming at Outdoor Education Centres to learning that occurs back at school.

Elementary students will continue having two-day visits and one overnight visit in their K-8 career. Secondary students will continue to be supported through designated programming at Forest Valley in addition to other sites after elementary visits have been fulfilled.

## **Part B: Investing in school ground infrastructure**

In addition to offering play and learning opportunities for students, school grounds provide social infrastructure for communities and promote ecosystem services – a feature of growing importance as the effects of climate change become more widely recognized and understood.

Through its longstanding partnership with Evergreen, the TDSB has supported locally initiated school ground greening projects since the early 2000s and has had a large tree planting program for almost as long.

In response to Canadian Standards Association safety guidelines for outdoor play equipment introduced in 1998, and the subsequent removal of many play structures in 2001, the TDSB implemented a Playground Learning Environment (PLE) program that ran for 13 years, whereby about 275 schools that lost equipment were provided with modest budgets to make improvements to their grounds.

Despite these early efforts, by the second decade of this century, a generation of underfunding for state of good repair for aging school infrastructure and the prioritizing of replacing major building components with the limited available funding, has left hundreds of school grounds in poor condition. The repercussions of these decisions have been felt particularly acutely by high-needs schools which are less able to fill the gap in public investments with large fundraising campaigns.

Eight years ago, attention started to slowly shift to making more intentional investments into improving school grounds. In 2013, the Board of Trustees approved the installation of artificial turf fields at elementary schools where extreme intensity of use has made growing grass impossible, and the creation of a Playing Field Reserve, funded from the revenue from the permitting of artificial turf fields.

In the same year, the Board approved an *Urban Forest Management Plan* that not only supported ongoing tree planting and sustained funding for tree maintenance, but was also the foundation upon which staff have operated a seasonal sawmill to create outdoor seating for schools using logs from trees killed by the emerald ash borer, and more recently, logs from depots operated by the City of Toronto.

In 2016, the Board approved more funding for artificial turf fields and a plan for improving the maintenance of grass playing fields, including the hiring of a full-time

position to oversee playing field maintenance, funded from the Playing Field Reserve. Since then the annual playing field maintenance budget has doubled from five hundred thousand dollars to one million dollars, thereby providing more capacity to help improve grass fields at many more schools. Having a highly trained and skilled field renovation crew with more funding, also gave Facility Services the means to start to slowly rebuild baseball diamonds that have suffered from years of neglect.

The switch from half-day to full-day kindergarten and the Ministry requirement that kindergarten students spend at least an hour outdoors a day, led to the creation of a modest *Grounds Improvement Fund* (GIF) funded from Renewal. The Fund has been used primarily to improve substandard outdoor learning areas for kindergarten students, which are most often found at high-needs schools. GIF is also being used increasingly to make improvements for students with special needs so that they can get outside, which is another area that has also been long overlooked. More recently, GIF funding has helped pay for the replacement of very old play equipment that can no longer be repaired.

A significant opportunity to re-invest in school grounds has arisen with the provision of more state of good repair funding from the Ministry of Education, often referred to as School Condition Index Funding, or SCI. Seventy percent of SCI funding is to be used to replace major building components, but thirty percent can be used to address other pressures, such as replacing carpeting in buildings, and dealing with infrastructure deficiencies on schools grounds such as fixing crumbling asphalt and dealing with poor drainage. Increasingly, SCI funds are being used to make significant improvements on school grounds that have major infrastructure deficiencies.

For a summary of projects that have taken place over the last few years, refer to Appendices C - F.

### **Consolidate and Build Upon Recent Gains**

If there is a desire to provide more support for outdoor learning over the long term, then there is an opportunity to consolidate and build upon the many gains outlined above through continued investments in school grounds.

Since the needs far outweigh the available resources, efforts must be focused on clearly articulated guiding principles and priorities. Sustained investments over time that adhere to the following guiding principles and priorities will help create vibrant schoolyards that support play and learning that are made accessible to all students:

## Guiding Principles

Investments into school sites should:

- Be equitable – by prioritizing high-needs schools, ensuring projects meet AODA standards for accessibility, and creating the conditions whereby students with special needs can make full use of the outdoors.
- Reflect the developmental needs of students – by creating spaces that promote activity, imaginative play, socialization, and learning.
- Put students first – by focusing on projects that support students directly such as replacing deteriorating hard surface play areas and failing play equipment, and particularly if funding is limited, by putting less emphasis on replacing parking lots.
- Be environmentally sustainable – by seeking opportunities to invest in green solutions such as right-sizing asphalt areas when they are being replaced, directing storm water into infiltration galleries/tree groves, and making use of underground soil cells when planting trees in harsh urban environments.

## Priorities

The priorities for TDSB-funded investments should include:

- Creating rich outdoor learning environments for kindergarten students at all schools.
- Making sure special-needs students can enjoy the benefits of the outdoors with their peers.
- Identifying and investing in school grounds with serious infrastructure deficiencies.
- Providing spaces for middle school students to help keep them at school during lunch breaks.
- Making log seating for outdoor classrooms.
- Investing in tree planting and maintenance particularly in schools and neighbourhoods with low levels of tree canopy and that are impacted the most from the urban heat island effect and higher levels of air pollution.
- Ensuring grass playing fields are well-maintained for multi-purpose play, including sports.
- Installing artificial turf at elementary schools where extreme intensity of use makes growing grass impossible and replacing the turf at the end of its lifecycle.
- Investing strategically in a small number of artificial turf fields at high schools to support physical education and athletics programs in underserved communities that are socially and economically-disadvantaged.

## Action Plan and Associated Timeline

The instructional supports for schools outlined in this report will commence in September 2021. Application of the guiding principles and priorities for investments in school ground infrastructure will begin upon the approval of this report.

## Resource Implications

The instructional supports for schools will be provided within the existing budget allocation for outdoor education.

School ground infrastructure deficiencies, improving outdoor spaces for kindergarten students, meeting the needs of special needs students, the provision of spaces for middle school students, new and replacement of artificial turf fields, and replacing play equipment\* will be funded from a combination of SCI, the Grounds Improvement Fund (Renewal) and the Playing Field Reserve.

Tree planting and maintenance will be funded from Renewal, and the maintenance of playing fields will be funded from the TDSB's maintenance budget.

\*Note: The replacement of play equipment will only be prioritized when a site's sole play structure is no longer viable.

## Communications Considerations

Trustees' Weekly and System Leaders Bulletin will be used to provide communication to the system. The [Taking Learning Outdoors](#) web portal will continue to be a living site, providing staff and families with up-to-date resources. The web portal will also serve as a platform to share stories from teachers and school communities to inspire and support the creation of a community of learners who are taking instruction outdoors during the instructional day.

## Board Policy and Procedure Reference(s)

P033 – Excursions

P028 – The Environment

PR511 – Excursions

## Appendices

- Appendix A: Board Decision Regarding Outdoor Learning
- Appendix B: The OPAL Program
- Appendix C: Grounds Improvement Fund (GIF) and School Condition Index (SCI) Site Projects, 2018 – 2020
- Appendix D: Field Renovation Projects, 2017 – 2020
- Appendix E: Outdoor Seating Projects, Installed and Planned, 2018 – 2021
- Appendix F: Large Tree Planting, 2018 – 2020

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## **Appendix A: Board Decision Regarding Outdoor Learning**

On December 9, 2020, the Board decided that the following be referred to staff:

- a. Present a report to the Program and School Services Committee in the January 2021 cycle of meetings, on the feasibility and implementation plan of the following:
  - i. In the short term, provide consistent and clear messaging, protocols, and program resources to all schools, in-person and especially virtual schools, elementary and secondary, that support use of the outdoors in day-to-day learning and support timely approaches to the use of outdoor spaces for learning, and include messaging and healthy living resources for families that highlights the importance of outdoor activities.
- b. Present a report to the Program and School Services Committee and the Finance, Budget and Enrolment Committee outlining a long-term plan for encouraging and supporting all schools, both elementary and secondary, to use outdoor spaces for instructional time throughout the day and that the plan:
  - i. be based on approaches used in the Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) program successfully piloted at TDSB schools;
  - ii. consider the use of pilots distributed across learning centres for an initial group of up to 24 schools (six per Learning Centre) as soon as possible, using an equity lens, including the use of disaggregated, race-based data, to determine which schools will be eligible, and depending on the timing of implementation include an outdoor learning program for virtual schools;
  - iii. include collaboration between the Sustainability Office and Outdoor Education in supporting schools with this work;
  - iv. include concrete steps for how outdoor learning can be encouraged at the secondary level as well;
  - v. include costs and funding source for implementation;
- c. Ensure that the concerns raised by employee groups in written delegation to Planning and Priorities meeting of December 8, 2020 are addressed in the development and execution of parts (a) and (b).
- d. Provide an update in the February – March 2021 cycle of meetings.



## **Appendix B – The OPAL Program**

In 2016, EcoKids (formerly Earth Day Canada) piloted the Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) program in six TDSB elementary schools. First established in the United Kingdom, OPAL is recognized as a best practice for supporting school improvement through outdoor play – as cited in UK Government reports. The program provided schools with ongoing mentorship and support through professional learning, community outreach, planning and policy development to overcome barriers and enrich opportunities for outdoor learning and play. The program expanded to 38 TDSB schools from 2016 to 2019.

While the OPAL program focused on time allocated for unstructured, outdoor play (e.g. recess) it also helped schools address barriers to taking learning outside, and plan for improved access and use of the existing outdoor environment. Schools developed strategies for all-weather and all-season use of their school grounds. Many educators made use of natural and upcycled loose parts to enrich outdoor learning and explore curriculum connections. Outreach through community events and meetings helped promote the importance of outdoor learning and build community support. Administration and support staff, including caretaking staff, worked together on strategies to support access to the outdoors and address concerns such as risk management and mess.

The PARK principles, championed in the OPAL program, guide schools to improve opportunities for outdoor learning, both for instructional time and through outdoor play. The PARK acronym addresses the following:

**Policy:** Developing school policies to encourage outdoor learning (e.g. all-weather access, use of all spaces, supervision practices to encourage outdoor exploration and learning).

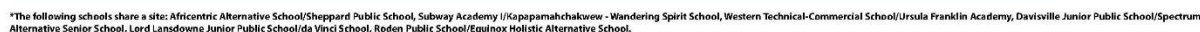
**Access:** Improving the ability for all students, year-round, to access all available outdoor spaces for learning and play.

**Risk:** Adopting a risk-benefit approach to inform decision making and encourage opportunities for challenge, growth and development.

**Knowledge:** Understanding how staff can support outdoor learning and providing ongoing opportunities for professional development.

\*Africentric Alternative School and Sheppard Public School share a site.

Field renovation projects can include any combination of sodding, aeration, overseeding, topdressing, fertilization and improving drainage of school playing fields. This work also includes renovation and maintenance to baseball diamonds and running tracks, and repair and installation of irrigation systems. In many cases, field renovation projects include multiple visits to schools.

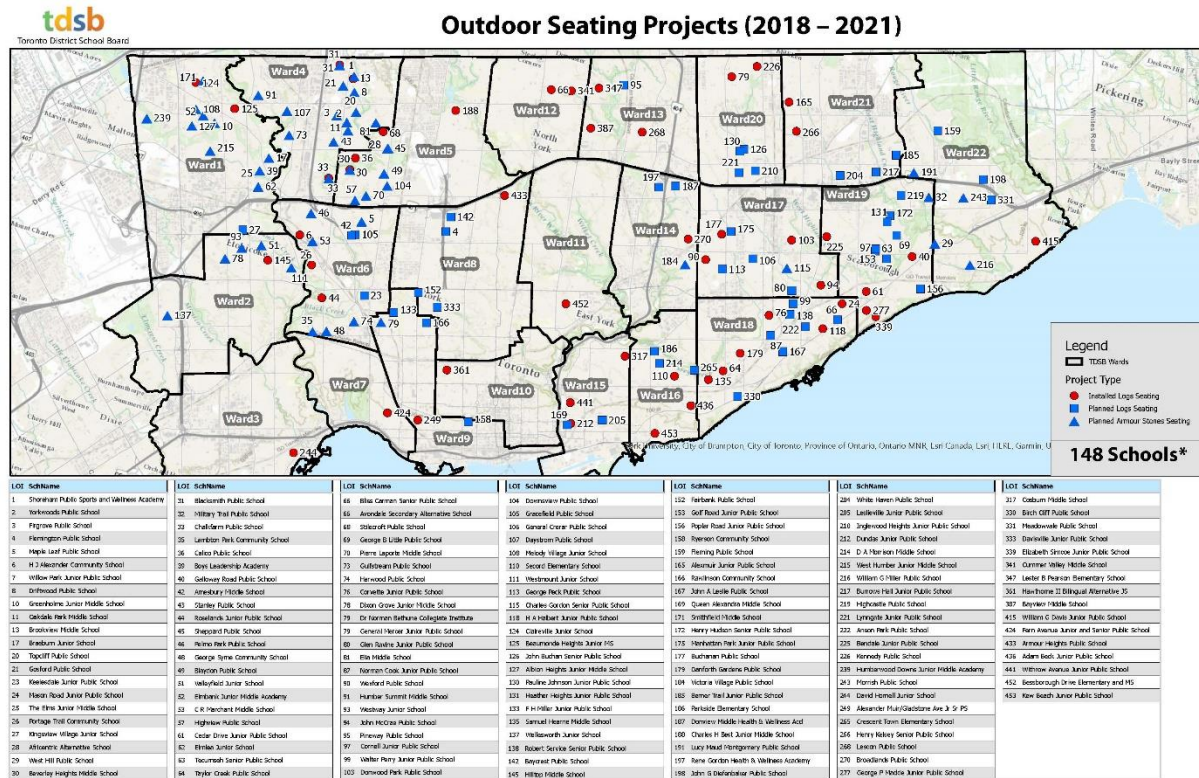
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## Appendix E – Outdoor Seating Projects, Installed and Planned, 2018 – 2021

The TDSB operates a seasonal sawmill at the 1 Civic Centre Court administration centre to create outdoor log seating. Initially, logs from TDSB trees killed by the emerald ash borer were milled at this site to create this seating. More recently, logs have been provided by the City of Toronto through an in-kind donation.

Schools in need of outdoor seating in the highest-risk neighbourhoods for COVID-19 identified by Toronto Public Health and with high external challenges based on the Leaning Opportunity Index (LOI) have been prioritized for the planned log seating and armour stone seating and accessible pathway projects.



## Appendix F – Large Tree Planting, 2018 – 2020

Each year, the City of Toronto donates large caliper trees to the TDSB. On average, between 250 and 350 large trees are planted by in-house trades each year on TDSB school grounds through this donation.

