

Equitable Access to Nature-based Learning

■ Key Points

- Green schoolyards boost child development, achievement and community wellbeing.
- Planning often reinforces inequity by funding well-served areas, leaving marginalized communities with less access to green learning spaces.
- Data mapping helps target equitable, community-led green investments.

■ What is the Issue?

Despite growing recognition of the benefits of outdoor learning — ranging from improved health and wellbeing to enhanced academic performance — opportunities for hands-on, nature-based learning are not equally available throughout Canada. Naturalized schoolyards, outdoor classrooms, community gardens and nature play spaces remain limited, especially in lower-income and racialized neighbourhoods.

Research shows that children in these communities may benefit even more from regular time in nature (i.e. the ‘**equigenic effect**’), but they face barriers due to poor infrastructure, unsafe or distant parks and lack of schoolyard greening. Government policy, urban planning and investments made by school system leaders often reinforce inequity by improving areas that are already well-served, rather than prioritizing those with the greatest need.

■ Trends and Challenges

Across Canada, access to outdoor learning spaces remains deeply uneven. Schools in higher income neighbourhoods are more likely to have naturalized schoolyards, gardens or outdoor classrooms, while schools in lower income and racialized communities often lack even basic green space.

At the same time, **demand for outdoor learning is increasing.** Parents, educators and municipalities are recognizing the educational, health and climate resilience benefits of greener schoolyards and public spaces. Canada’s recent commitment to establish a network of urban national parks underscores the growing recognition that access to nearby nature is essential public infrastructure and will support educators and the community to learn in and about nature. Emerging data driven approaches, such as mapping canopy cover alongside income, race and education indicators are helping to identify priority areas for investment. The trend is clear: **equitable, community-led green infrastructure is becoming essential for both learning and wellbeing.**

■ Why is this Important?

Outdoor learning promotes physical, emotional and cognitive development — especially for young children. When children learn through direct interaction with the natural world, they develop executive function, attention, resilience, curiosity and stronger social connections. Green spaces in communities and schools reduce urban heat, improve air quality and enhance community cohesion. They are essential public infrastructure.

Embedding nature-based learning in schoolyards, parks and public spaces makes nature a part of daily life. This supports biodiversity goals, health outcomes and Truth and Reconciliation objectives — especially when Indigenous-led and community-informed approaches are prioritized.

■ Recommendations

- Prioritize infrastructure investments in underserved neighbourhoods, especially where schools lack green space
- Support the development of outdoor classrooms, natural playgrounds, pollinator gardens and learning trails
- Integrate nature-based learning into provincial curricula and school board capital planning
- Fund educator training and Indigenous-led program design
- Build partnerships between municipalities, school boards, non-government organizations (NGOs) and community groups to co-manage shared green learning spaces
- Use data (e.g., canopy cover, income, education, race) to guide equitable placement of nature-based learning infrastructure



■ CWF'S Role

The Canadian Wildlife Federation (CWF) is working to ensure that outdoor learning opportunities are accessible to all Canadians, regardless of where they live. Through programs like [WILD Spaces](#) and [Gardening for Wildlife](#), CWF supports the creation of pollinator gardens, naturalized schoolyards and community habitats that serve both educational and ecological purposes. By providing training, resources and mentorship for educators, **CWF helps integrate hands on, curriculum linked conservation learning into everyday school life.**

CWF also champions equity by advocating for investments in underserved communities and supporting Indigenous and community led approaches to designing and managing green learning spaces. At the same time, through programs like [WILD Family Nature Club](#), CWF helps connect students, families and educators with existing outdoor learning spaces such as local parks, trails and community green areas, while advocating for equitable access so that everyone has the chance to learn in them. By building partnerships with school boards, municipalities and NGOs, **CWF is strengthening the movement for equitable access to outdoor learning.** In doing so, CWF contributes not only to student development and community wellbeing but also to Canada's commitments to biodiversity protection, climate resilience and reconciliation.

■ Sources For More Information

- Park People (Canada): ccpr.parkpeople.ca
- Re-Wild Your School: renature.org/focus
- [Landry et al. \(2020\): Environmental Inequality in Urban Forests in Canada](#)
- [Stevenson et al. \(2020\): Green Schoolyards and Equitable Access to Nature](#)
- [Race and Nature in the City: Engaging Youth of Colour in Nature-based Activities](#)
- [Ethnocultural and socioeconomic disparities in exposure to residential greenness within urban Canada](#)
- [Disparities in economic values for nature-based activities in Canada](#)

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