



Osprey Wilds

Environmental Learning Center

July 14, 2024

Dear LCCMR Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to present last month regarding our 2025 proposal, "*Outdoor School for Minnesota K-12 Students*." There were several questions asked during the Q&A portion of the presentation and we'd like to more fully address those questions here:

Firstly, we'd like to speak to the question regarding the state's role in funding the environmental learning centers. The state is not funding Minnesota's environmental learning centers general operating budgets. This is a program-specific request and the \$5.2 million over 3 years requested represents only 15% of our collective budgets. **We are seeking ENRTF funds on behalf of MN schools who value their experience at an overnight outdoor learning trip and need financial aid in order to attend.** The schools who request and receive this funding serve low-income communities, underrepresented populations, and have clearly demonstrated and communicated their need for financial aid to us. This financial aid is distributed to schools, not individual students and is not a voucher program.

It is our belief that **it is the State's role to educate Minnesota's students** and for over 50 years the five environmental learning centers (which are all accredited schools, something entirely unique in the whole nation) have been an important part of Minnesota's education system and something our State should take great pride in. Our classes are hands-on, aligned to state academic standards, and promote social-emotional learning including creativity, problem solving, resilience, and confidence building. Our educational reach spans over 60 Minnesota counties, and our relevance is stronger today than ever with today's youth facing an unprecedented mental and physical health crisis.

Secondly, our centers have long practiced strong fiscal management and strategic planning. **Last year, our five centers averaged a modest charge of \$162 per person for a 3-day/2-night trip, despite our true program costs being more than double that amount.** This fee covers 2 nights of lodging in climate controlled dormitories, 7 meals, 12 hours of classes, 2 one-hour evening programs, and 2 evening activities. Each environmental learning center strives to keep our fees as low as possible to make our programs accessible to as many schools as possible. When we provide ENRTF financial aid to schools we are providing funding for the student's educational experience only while at our centers. Each center fundraises to offset the true program costs but schools increasingly tell us that our efforts are not enough without additional support like ENRTF funding.

To highlight the importance of this funding, we'd like to share the following testimonial:

"Prior to receiving the ENRTF financial aid last year, funding for our trip had become increasingly difficult. Our school does not currently have an ongoing funding source for Deep Portage (aside from student fundraising) or money in our budget to assist with the trip. The vast majority of our tuition and transportation fees are funded by student-led fundraisers. Receiving ENRTF funding was a tremendous weight off of our shoulders and helped in the following ways:

- 1) We were able to provide a significantly discounted chaperone price. In past years, we struggled to attract volunteers for the trip and in 2022 we nearly had to cancel our trip for this reason. After receiving financial aid through ENRTF, we had about a 50% increase in adult volunteers. This is in part due to the cost being \$40/adult, instead of \$100+.

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- 2) Students were able to sell 2 boxes of candy to pay their tuition. In past years, this was 5-6 boxes. Having to sell a lower amount actually resulted in higher success overall.
- 3) The stress on our school staff who supported the trip was much lower, largely because we collected less money from candy bar sales than usual so we spent less time managing money.
- 4) We did not need to have an additional fall fundraiser to fund the buses because overall costs were lower thanks to the ENRTF financial aid.

“It cannot be overstated how appreciated the extra support from the ENRTF financial aid was last year! It made us feel as though the trip may be feasible for us for many more years to come.”

Thirdly, in an effort to not repeatedly seek additional funds to support schools (including ENRTF funds), Minnesota’s environmental learning centers introduced “Outdoor School for All Minnesota K-12 Students” legislation last session. Unfortunately, funding was not secured, which is why we are seeking additional ENRTF funds this year to ensure there is no gap in providing financial assistance to schools while we continue to advocate for passing of “Outdoor School for All”. We would love nothing more than to have this year’s ENRTF request for school financial aid be our last, but we cannot predict the future, nor count on legislation passing. **We cannot be passive and watch schools cancel their trips for financial reasons when there are funding streams like ENRTF available that align perfectly with our missions, and when our programs align so well with ENRTF’s stated environmental education goals.**

Finally, we’d like to point out that the work of MN’s environmental learning centers helps create a citizenry that values the purpose of the ENRTF, “to provide a long-term, consistent, and stable source of funding for activities that protect, conserve, preserve, and enhance Minnesota’s “air, water, and, fish, wildlife, and other natural resources” for the benefit of current citizens and future generations.” There is substantial evidence from observational and intervention studies that indicates that overall time spent in nature leads to increased perceived value for connectedness to nature and, subsequently, greater pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors. **If the LCCMR wants to ensure that ENRTF funds are valued and supported for decades to come, we believe it will understand the importance of supporting MN youth in spending time outdoors at our centers;** the 48 hours onsite, including 15 hours of outdoor instructional time during a 3-day/2-night experience at one of our sites helps ensure that future Minnesotans value the environment, time outdoors, and the importance of the ENRTF.

We are grateful for your past support and consideration of this current request to support MN schools who need financial aid to attend an overnight program at one of Minnesota’s five accredited environmental learning centers.

Sincerely,

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