

AN OPEN LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL-RUN BACKCOUNTRY TRIPS

June 2018

The tragic drowning of Jeremiah Perry last July during a Board-sponsored backcountry canoe trip prompted many people involved with outdoor education to examine the guidelines and practices to which they adhere. Despite acknowledging the positive outcomes that are provided by time spent in the outdoors, such as resilience, creativity, leadership, resourcefulness and curiosity,¹ the question may have arisen, “*Is it really worth the risk for school boards to run these types of trips?*” The answer from the Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO) is an unequivocal “**Yes.**”

COEO is a non-profit, volunteer-based organization that promotes safe and high quality outdoor education experiences for people of all ages and acts as a professional body for outdoor educators in the province of Ontario.² COEO stands behind the professionals employed across the province to coordinate outdoor education experiences, including multi-day backcountry trips. This letter is written in support of the superb educators who follow strict protocols of preparedness, maintain certifications and take extended time away from their personal lives in order to supervise such trips.

According to the Ontario Ministry of Education, learning experiences in the outdoors are seen as a valuable tool to encourage students to engage in active and healthy activities³. Rather than eliminating or severely restricting school-run backcountry trips as a reactive measure, COEO encourages school boards province-wide to continue to focus on the benefits of these trips and continue to support teachers in mitigating and addressing all perceived risks.

Nothing is without risk. Each year, the hundreds of school-run backcountry trips that take place in Algonquin Park garner little attention from the media. With respect to fatalities or serious injuries like concussions, the likelihood of these occurring from outdoor activities in the backcountry is extremely low when compared to the likelihood of serious incidents as the result of high-impact school sports such as football.⁴ Inherent risks involved in backcountry excursions are continually managed and mitigated as they arise. The Ontario Physical Education Safety Guidelines, managed by Ophea, represent the minimum standards for risk management practice for school boards.⁵ School boards may individually choose to implement more stringent guidelines for any activity. Prior to restricting the opportunity for students to participate, COEO strongly suggests that school boards consult with individual employees and/or professional groups who are highly knowledgeable and familiar with managing risk when travelling with student groups in the backcountry for multiple days at a time.

When considering multi-day backcountry camping with qualified trip leaders who follow specific industry standards, one can argue that the most dangerous part of the entire excursion is vehicle transportation. The Ministry of Transportation reported 9 fatalities from bus or school vehicle accidents in the province of Ontario in 2016.⁶ No statistic related to fatalities while backcountry camping is anywhere near this number on a yearly basis in Ontario. Fatalities across the nation from lightning strikes while camping or hiking between 1986 and 2005 total just 11 people.⁷ Fatal black bear attacks are also extremely rare. Even with a current black bear population of close to 100,000 in Ontario, only 10 human victims were ever fatally mauled in Ontario over the last century.⁸

Backcountry travel directly exposes participants to the natural environment in ways that engender personal connections, knowledge, practical skills and environmental ethic. The experiential nature of learning in this setting relates curricula to real life situations in the complexities of one's natural surroundings, providing a unique means of developing critical thinking skills, and stimulating attributes such as innovation and imagination. Outdoor education also broadens and deepens the knowledge base of all subject areas; the multifaceted contexts, experiences and interactions found in outdoor settings provide opportunities for both personal and interpersonal growth. This includes the development of individual traits such as confidence, empathy, and a sense of responsibility, as well as the development of group skills such as effective communication and co-operation. Finally, these experiences can contribute to the lifelong wellbeing of participants and provide valuable skill development in activities that are personally fulfilling and environmentally sustainable.⁹

COEO urges administrators to renew their support of backcountry activities with students to ensure that the potential benefits from these opportunities are not lost. Trustee Robin Pilkey, current Chair of the Board for the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), has stated "It's a great experience for your personal growth and your education and we don't want to stop these."¹⁰ These opportunities are also crucial to foster a sense of environmental sustainability in participants, especially at a time when today's youth are more disconnected from the natural environment than ever before. Kurt Hahn, the founder of several experiential learning schools and Outward Bound stated, "Expeditions can greatly contribute towards building strength of character."¹¹

Thank you for considering the longstanding importance of this message, as we prepare for another season of impactful and valuable school-run backcountry trips.

Sincerely,

Liz Kirk, COEO President
On behalf of the Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (www.coeo.org)

NOTES

¹ <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2018/05/sponsor-content-outdoors-worlds-greatest-playground/>

² <https://www.coeo.org/who-we-are/>

³ http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/memos/feb2018/outdoor_spending.html

⁴ <https://nccsir.unc.edu/reports/>

⁵ <http://safety.ophea.net/>

⁶ <http://www.mto.gov.on.ca/english/publications/pdfs/preliminary-2016-orsar-selected-statistics.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change/services/lightning/safety/fatalities-injury-statistics.html>

⁸ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/science/a-few-surprises-in-decades-long-black-bear-study/article579472/>

⁹ Grant Linney (2004) <https://www.coeo.org/values/>

¹⁰ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/tdsb-lays-out-new-rules-for-student-trips-after-death-of-jeremiah-perry-1.4665607>

¹¹ <http://www.kurthahn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Hahn-Quotes.pdf>