

The Forest Next Door

PILOT PROJECT SUMMARY



nature connection

holistic development

community stewardship

sustainable futures

therapeutic spaces

THE BIG IDEA

The Forest Next Door is a community-driven initiative dedicated to making immersive, Ontario curriculum-connected outdoor learning opportunities a natural part of school life. Our long-term vision is to transform nearby natural urban forest spaces into **"living classrooms"** within walking distance of Ottawa elementary schools. This project proposal invites the City of Ottawa to support the use of the **Poole Creek** site in the heart of Stittsville as a community-based urban forest and outdoor learning space.

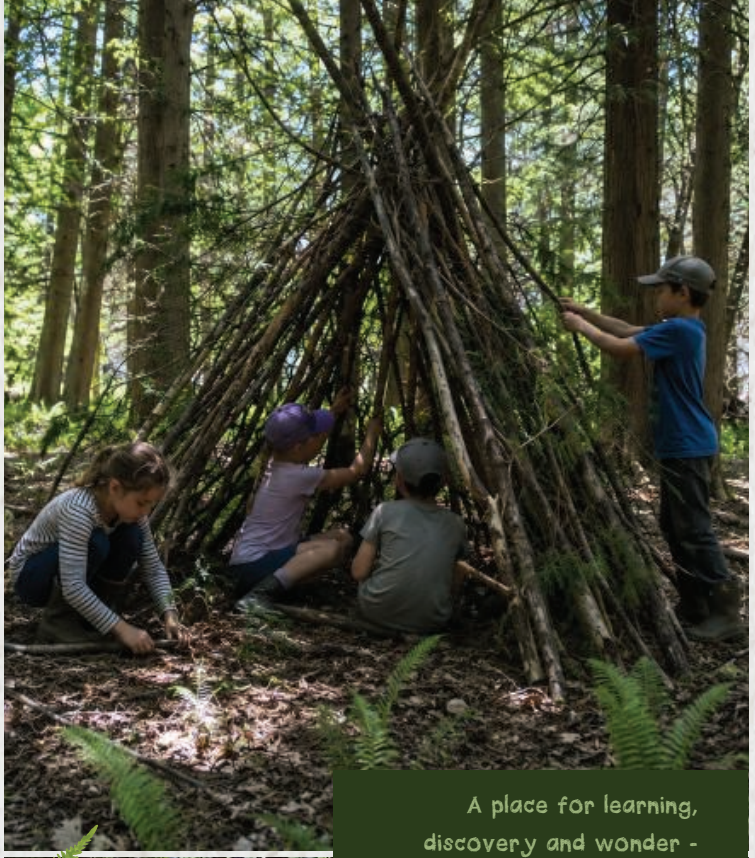
WHY THIS MATTERS

By partnering with schools, families, municipalities, and community organizations, we aim to **normalize high-quality outdoor learning** for students from **Kindergarten to Grade 6** during the regular school day. Through this work, **The Forest Next Door** supports the development of s**tudent wellbeing, cognitive performance** (ex: attention), **engagement, inclusion, and environmental stewardship,** while strengthening the connection between children and the urban forests that surround them.

BACKGROUND & RATIONALE

The concept emerged through school leadership experience, community work with equity-denied families, and hands-on learning from Forest and Nature School programs in the Ottawa–Gatineau region. Those experiences reinforced the developmental value of nature-based outdoor learning and the local appetite to expand access.

The outdoor learning movement is growing but remains uncommon in day-to-day elementary practice in Ottawa. The Forest Next Door addresses this gap by activating existing urban forest spaces as safe, inclusive, nearby learning environments—reducing barriers (travel, cost, accessibility) and strengthening students' connection to nature and community.





A place for learning, discovery and wonder - right in our neighbourhoods.

Children who grow up "knowing" the forest become the stewards that our communities need.



Self-driven exploration and play is a child's rehearsal ground for life. In nature, children can explore, take appropriate risks, invent games, solve problems and interact with others in ways that build confidence, creativity, resilience and self-esteem. Regular opportunities for movement, exploration and child-directed play support attention, concentration, emotional regulation and a lifelong sense of joy in learning.





A VISION OF GROWTH

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The Forest Next Door is grounded in a set of guiding principles that shape all planning, partnerships, programming, and long-term decision-making. These principles ensure that the initiative remains inclusive, purposeful, sustainable, and responsive to the needs of children, families, educators, and the broader community.

Support child well-being and engagement: Regular time in nature provides neurodivergent children with a calm, supportive environment where learning through movement, sensory experiences, exploration, and self-directed discovery can flourish.

Uphold high-quality learning: Critical thinking, problem-solving, reasoning skills, as well as cross-curricular learning to name a few.

Promote equity and access: Neighbourhood-based sites reduce transportation barriers and can be designed with accessibility in mind.

Advance environmental stewardship: Sustained interaction with local ecosystems builds respect, care, and long-term stewardship.

Create a scalable model: A structured pilot with evaluation creates a practical roadmap for expansion across Ottawa.

OUR VISION

Ottawa, a city where every child can learn in nature.

The Forest Next Door

OUR MISSION

Collaborate with schools, the City of Ottawa, and community partners to normalize immersive, high-quality urban nature-based learning as part of the daily routine in Ottawa elementary schools.

OUR GOAL

Build a sustainable, inclusive urban forest learning model, connected to the Ontario curriculum, that supports children's holistic development while strengthening community connection to local natural spaces.

Every urban forest has unique gifts to offer, supporting exploration, learning, and belonging.

THE PATH FORWARD

OUTCOMES

Student outcomes: increased engagement, confidence, emotional regulation, physical activity, and connection to nature.

School/educator outcomes: practical forest learning opportunities connected to the Ontario curriculum, linked to shared tools and safety protocols and strengthened school–community partnerships.

Community outcomes: activated and protected urban natural spaces; volunteer and local business involvement; stronger neighbourhood connection.

Evidence and learning: qualitative and quantitative data on participation, accessibility, well-being, and educational impact to guide improvement.

Scale-readiness: a documented pilot framework and recommendations to expand to additional Ottawa communities and future sites.



KEY ACTIVITIES SUMMARY OF PHASES



2026 **(Site: Poole Creek Park) Community engagement & planning:** identify interested schools and nearby nature sites; build partnerships; launch communications materials; run a community fundraiser.



January - June 2027 **Pilot program development:** refine scope through consultation; draft and finalize the pilot framework; survey school boards -identify previously trained staff in outdoor nature programing; establish operating systems (ex: frequency of visits per class per school year) and initial safety/environmental stewardship practices; pursue grants and sponsorship.



September 2027 - June 2028 **School readiness & transition supports (soft launch):** share seasonal toolkits; support indoor-to-outdoor learning transition; define training outcomes; plan teacher training with professional development partners.



September 2028 - June 2029 **Launch readiness:** finalize shared protocols and expectations; complete site modifications with business support, ensuring it provides added community value; recruit volunteers for maintenance and safety; finalize schedules and training plans.



September 2029 **Pilot launch:** deliver regular outdoor nature and forest learning experiences with a limited number of schools; monitor participation and accessibility; collect feedback; document lessons learned.



June 2029 - March 2030 **Evaluation & growth planning:** complete an evaluation report; define a sustainable growth strategy; secure commitments and investors; begin development of two additional UFE sites.

Goal: Build a walkable, community-based forest learning model that can grow across Ottawa.

GROWING AHEAD

The budget will scale with the phases: early years emphasize coordination, planning, consultation, communications, and partnership-building; later years add teacher training supports, site readiness work and evaluation. Core cost categories include (1) part-time coordinator, (2) administration and operations, and (3) The Forest Next Door learning supplies and materials. Funding will be pursued through a mix of grants (municipal/provincial/federal where eligible), community fundraising, and local business sponsorship.



HIGH-LEVEL OVERVIEW OF BUDGET

Budget Item (high level)	**Year 1**	**Year 2**	**Year 3**	**Year 4**
Personel/ Project Coordination	Planning & stakeholder engagement	Framework development & funding work	Training coordination & school readiness	Launch support & program coordination
Administration & Operations	Communications materials, meetings, basic admin	Operating systems, protocols drafting	Scheduling, volunteer coordination	Ongoing operations, evaluation administration
Outdoor learning supplies	Initial resource identification	Prototype toolkits & materials	Expanded toolkits & training resources	Program delivery supplies & replenishment

Potential funding sources (to be confirmed):

- Community fundraising (e.g., Children's benefit concert November 2026)
- Local business and community sponsorships
- Eligible grants across levels of government

"All children need nature. Not just the ones whose parents appreciate nature. Not only those children of a certain economic class or culture or set of abilities. Every child." - Richard Louv

OUR TEAM

Cindy Beauchamp
Executive Director of
The Forest Next Door

Dr Louise de Lannoy
Executive Director of
Outdoor Play Canada
(OPC)

Gaelan Jaffray
Consultant, Graphic Design
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Julie Butterworth
Elementary teacher
(OCDSB)

Erin Way
Retired Kindergarten teacher
(OCDSB)

Tammy Potter
Program Supervisor of
Ottawa Forest and Nature School
(OFNS)

Kim Hiscott
CEO of Andrew Fleck
Children's Services
(AFCS)

CONTINUE THE JOURNEY

The Urban Forest Experience Centre is rooted in a growing body of research that highlights the importance of nature connection in childhood. Across Canada and around the world, educators, researchers, and communities are rediscovering what many children already know instinctively: time spent in nature supports healthy development, curiosity, resilience, and well-being.

To learn more about outdoor and nature-based education:

- **Child and Nature Alliance of Canada** childnature.ca
- **Outdoor Play Canada** www.outdoorplaycanada.ca
- **Nature Canada** naturecanada.ca

Getting out of the classroom and into Nature
https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9149177/

Benefits of outdoor learning for neurodivergent students
https://wildandimmersive.ubc.ca/benefits-of-outdoor-learning-for-children

Why kids need to spend time in Nature
https://childmind.org/article/why-kids-need-to-spend-time-in-nature



The future will belong to problem-solvers, collaborators, and innovators. Nature is where those skills take root.