

Environmental - Conservation Action Program (E-CAP)

Beyond School Bells' 2021 Focus Project

Overview

Beyond School Bells (BSB), Nebraska's afterschool and summer learning network, a program of the Nebraska Children and Families Foundation, is excited to announce the launch of our Environmental - Conservation Action Program (E-CAP), a major focus for our work in 2021 and beyond. E-CAP will serve as a hub to coordinate and support the expansion of both BSB's existing and new environmental and conservation-oriented afterschool, weekend and summer learning experiences. Building on community strengths and elevating youth interests, this will help us achieve our goal of creating locally relevant and engaging expanded learning opportunities for youth across Nebraska.

Vision

There is a tremendous amount of high-quality work, facilitated by a variety of organizations, already underway in Nebraska's informal environmental / conservation education space. These experiences meet important needs. However, existing programs are rarely connected and sequential. We envision E-CAP positioning BSB to better support, enhance and connect existing efforts, while at the same time providing a mechanism to build new and invigorate existing partnerships to facilitate informal learning opportunities that reflect local, state, national and global needs. This effort will provide youth across the state with multiple opportunities (K-12) expanding the knowledge, skills, behaviors and action strategies they, and Nebraska, will need to address future environmental challenges and opportunities.

Focus

Over the past several years, and through the support of generous partners, BSB has been building and testing various aspects of this work through collaborative, signature projects including the Conservation Management Summer Internship Program, BioBlitz, Tree-a-thon and many others. E-CAP activities will be woven into BSB's community investments and priority initiatives and organizationally will be part of BSB's Expanded Learning Opportunities (ELO) Innovation Network, a public-private initiative launched with support from the NE Department of Education to enhance, support, and grow ELO opportunities complementing and enhancing formal school-day learning.

Themes & Future Activities

1. Outdoor Education / Learning
2. Energy Sources & Uses
3. Transportation
4. Economic Development
5. Environmental Design
6. Food / Food Systems
7. Environmental / Ecological Resources and Systems
8. Materials Use / Recycling
9. Service / Civic Engagement
10. Health / Mental Health
11. Environmental Equity / Justice



E-CAP Action Plan



Our Goal

In response to COVID and our goal of supporting safer learning spaces, we will prioritize **outdoor education** in the spring / summer 2021, giving us a time sensitive opportunity to launch E-CAP. Importantly, in designing the framework to guide E-CAP, we are committed to helping afterschool and summer programs move from a series of exciting albeit disconnected initiatives and one-off experiences to a framework housing a mix of relevant, interconnected, comprehensive learning opportunities. While confident that these eleven themes will provide us with such a framework, we are open to and encourage local adaptations.

Indeed, future E-CAP programming will reflect youth interests and provide diverse, interconnected, age appropriate, mutually reinforcing opportunities necessary to build the knowledge, skills, behaviors and action strategies they can utilize throughout their lives as they work to enhance the sustainability of their communities, our state, nation and world. These should be fun and engaging, community-relevant and powered activities and experiences starting at the elementary level and continuing, with increasing complexity and added opportunities for learning and action in high school.



Systems Development

The following systems level and programming opportunities will direct initial E-CAP activities:

1. Conduct listening / design sessions with youth to gather insight into the kind of environmental / conservation education programming they would like to experience
2. Engaging existing community partners to identify interests / needs / potential partners
3. Collect and organize our current BSB Environmental curriculum and experiences
4. Identify and catalog current activities of local Expanded Learning Opportunity programs
5. Identify current and prospective players / partners in this arena
6. Reach out to / engage existing and new external partners and funders to support E-CAP

E-CAP Action Plan

Pilot Projects

1. Launch new E-CAP activities, such as the Greenery and other high tech sustainable ag., that bring new energy and excitement into afterschool and summer learning programs
2. Initiate a grant opportunity for NE summer programs supporting outdoor and environmental education which can provide a testing ground for E-CAP opportunities
3. Work with school and community partners to weave these activities into an interconnected continuum of age and developmentally appropriate experiences.
4. Integrate E-CAP into ongoing BSB program initiatives and activities
5. Initiate design sessions to develop curriculum / experiences that fill identified gaps and meet youth / community interests
6. Incentivize new partnership opportunities to expand and enhance afterschool and summer programming that addresses E-CAPs eleven thematic areas



Conclusion

We are convinced that E-CAP is the right focus for BSB to pursue at this moment. The wide and growing array of environmental challenges and the new administration's Climate Action Plan will help galvanize public awareness, facilitate new educational opportunities, and promote environment and conservation friendly actions. Nebraska youth need to be prepared to take advantage of these opportunities. Similarly, COVID-responsive actions have shown that learning takes

place everywhere and all the time and Nebraska educators and communities will need to engage youth in multiple venues, both in and out of school, to accelerate and renew learning. But to engage youth, we must deliberately engage youth interests. And that is perhaps the most important element that we feel will ensure E-CAP's success – at its core it is built on an understanding that young people care deeply and want to learn more about and engage with environmental and conservation issues. E-CAP will provide more such opportunities for young people in ELO programs across Nebraska.

