

TIME TO GO OUTSIDE

AN INTERVIEW WITH DUNCAN WHITTICK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF
THE COLUMBIA BASIN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION NETWORK

The Columbia Basin Environmental Education Network (CBEEN) is a not-for-profit society and registered charity dedicated to encouraging environmental stewardship and sustainability in the Columbia Basin by supporting environmental educators. CBEEN has grown over the years to be a large and vibrant network of passionate educators from across the Columbia Basin and beyond. CBEEN was born out of a shared sense of identity, and from the common desire to support and promote environmental education on a regional scale.

What led to the establishment of CBEEN and what partners form your network?

CBEEN is now one of the largest environmental education networks in Canada. It was started by a small group of educators in the Columbia Basin who — at the time — had to travel all the way to the Lower Mainland and other provinces just to access professional environmental learning resources. Eventually, they started thinking to themselves: 'Why are we doing this? We should just come together and create our own initiative in this region'. So, they did.

Our network really started to grow when we brought together teams of teachers, Principals, Vice-Principals, and senior administrators from school districts across our region to our annual Leadership Clinic. We worked together to come up with a plan for better supporting environmental education, which led to mutual trust and a shared understanding and vision. Our network is deeply rooted in partnership and collaboration.

It has been almost 20 years now since CBEEN was born and I've had the privilege of being the

WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION (EE)?

"...a long-term investment in the general health and well-being of individuals, communities, ecosystems and the planet. Effective environmental education produces ecologically literate citizens who understand and value healthy environments. They understand their connection to and impact on natural environments, and through this understanding become motivated to act as environmental stewards and live sustainable, healthy lives."

— CBEEN

by

Paige Jung

Communications Assistant, BCPVPA

Executive Director for the last decade. CBEEN has grown significantly, and we now have more than 500 members in our network. While we are tied geographically to the Columbia Basin, we are part of a larger network working in partnership with many environmental education organizations across the province and across the nation.

Provincially, we work with all of the partners within the **Classrooms to Communities (C2C)**, a provincial network of key environmental & outdoor learning organizations. Most notably, we work with the Environmental Educators Provincial Specialist Association (EEPSA), which is a part of the BC Teachers' Federation (BCTF), and with the Kootenay-Boundary Environmental Education (KBEE), which is a committee of the BC School Superintendents Association (BCSSA). Together we have identified environmental learning as a priority.

CBEEN is made up not only of teachers and Principals, but also of many community educators who come from more than 100 community-based organizations that we work with. Currently, we are working on expanding our Outdoor Learning Store geographically so that we can better support schools across Canada. Our goal is to not just bring learning outside, but also to help educators become stewards

of the outdoors by approaching EE in a citizen-science or civic responsibility way.

How have you seen the interest and focus on environmental education grow in BC, and how has that impacted CBEEN's reach?

The big underpinning of CBEEN's growth was the redesign of the BC curriculum. This caused a major shift in the support for, and availability of, inquiry-based, experiential and real-world learning in the province. This major shift also gave us the opportunity to be more synergistic in our approach to outdoor learning, and to focus more on improving its effectiveness and accessibility for all learners.

Sometimes people think of environmental education as just science but, in actuality, it is interdisciplinary at its core and has the potential to support learning at all grade levels using that lens. There is a real openness amongst education organizations in BC – they not only want to *connect* with us but they want to *collaborate* with us.

Over the years, we've found that when we invest in these collaborative relationships and get to know one another, our impact can go beyond us as individuals, and even beyond our organizations.

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What long-term impacts do you think we'll see on classrooms because of the implementation of more outdoor learning?

I think EE changes the way we view the structure of learning. Over time, our hope is that school leaders will be able to create and facilitate a learning structure that's healthier for them, that's healthier for their students, and that's healthier for their communities. Our hope is that communities would gain a strong understanding of — and connection to — their place, and feel empowered to be able to support their community.

I don't believe we should separate the natural environment from the human environment. It's our environment that we all need to support and maintain as a healthy place for everyone for the future. Through this lens, in the future, we'll have a more empowered group of teachers, learners and school leaders who can better support the health of our world.

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As we all know, we're facing a number of crises in the world right now. I believe that we need to empower people to not just be responsive to these crises, but to be *proactive*. That's already a part of the culture in BC, but I think we need stronger tools. Giving our leaders and learners those tools is really crucial, and will be incredibly powerful.

When educators and learners have a deeper connection with the outdoors, they are also more empowered to care for and protect their environment.

How has CBEEN been collaborating with Principals and Vice-Principals in BC?

We've really broadened our perspective as an organization over the years. In the beginning, we were focused only on supporting environmental educators. That meant that we could only work with educators who viewed and identified themselves as environmental educators, and this was quite limiting.

We quickly realized that we really want to support *all* educators and the education system as a whole. Currently in our region, we're working with the majority of the schools in our area, and we're starting to see a positive ripple effect take place. Communities across our country are becoming more interested and aware of the enormous potential environmental and place-based learning have.





What are some of the challenges of implementing environmental education in BC?

Before COVID-19, I think the majority of us knew that getting outside was healthier for learners in many respects. Now with the pandemic, it's becoming all the more clearer that outdoor learning is a safer and healthier option that offers both mental and physical benefits.

However, one of the challenges that CBEEN is focused on addressing is the accessibility of EE programs. *How can we ensure that all learners are supported in outdoor learning?* Improving accessibility would benefit not only students with physical disabilities, but also students who may have certain fears or preconceptions about the outdoors. We want to ensure we can support them in this type of learning.

Another challenge we're seeing is the slow transition of investments, from school buildings and structures, to more outdoor learning resources. However, over the years, we've been seeing a lot more interest and uptake in creating outdoor learning spaces.

Lastly, there's often this misconception that by going outside, you're encountering more risk. We believe that it's actually *riskier* to stay inside from a health perspective. If we look at the big picture, our health and well-being as a society will be worse off by not going outside.

For Principals and Vice-Principals who want to introduce more outdoor learning in their schools, where can they start?

There's nothing I love more than when somebody comes to me and says, "*We're looking for this. Where can we find it?*" It's a pleasure for me, and for any of these organizations, to point educators to the right resource. There are a lot of resources available for educators, specifically the C2C network and our CBEEN network.

It's important that we collaboratively come together to address issues, support one another, and affect change in a meaningful way. Just remember that there are real people in these environmental learning organizations who have the capacity and mandate to support you in any of your needs related to environmental education.

I think our BC school leaders have the capacity to create new, healthier learning environments. Beyond just moving desks outside, there are opportunities facilitate outdoor learning spaces that are accessible to learners at all levels. I recognize that it often takes a considerable amount of time and effort to establish these partnerships and routines for outdoor learning, but once they're going – it has proven to be very powerful.

“Educators experience the positive outcomes when they participate in professional development with CBEEN, and that gives them the encouragement to try the lessons with their students. As far as getting outside, the location is easy for us. The wilderness is right outside our doors which makes it accessible.”

- **CARISSA HART (SD5 VICE-PRINCIPAL)**

“In the Wild Voices program, teachers are learning alongside their students and they learn different ideas about how to present the material to their students.”

- **JANET KUIJT (SD5 VICE-PRINCIPAL)**

“Focusing on cross-curricular learning and being connected to the beautiful place in which we live, has been the greatest win for our school. The pandemic and staffing changes put us off our game for a bit – but we’re coming back!”

- **ALYSSAN GAUTHIER (SD6 VICE-PRINCIPAL)**



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