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FINAL REPORT OF THE SENATE OUTDOOR LEARNING STUDY COMMITTEE (2021 SENATE RESOLUTION 203)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Senator Sheikh Rahman, Chair
District 5

Senator Jennifer Jordan
District 6

Senator Burt Jones
District 25

Senator Ed Harbison
District 15

Senator Sally Harrell
District 40

*Prepared by the Senate Research Office
2021*

COMMITTEE FOCUS, CREATION, AND DUTIES

The Senate Outdoor Learning Study Committee was created by the adoption of Senate Resolution 203 during the 2021 Legislative Session. The Committee was tasked with understanding how outdoor learning experiences can help Georgia's children and young adults both in their educational experience and in their personal development, and identifying legislative responses that could provide Georgia's children and young adults with more opportunities for beneficial and effective outdoor learning experiences. The Committee met twice during the interim, on September 2, 2021, and again on October 18, 2021. Both Committee meetings took place at the Georgia State Capitol. During these meetings, the Committee received public testimony from a number of industry participants and stakeholders.

Senator Sheikh Rahman of the 5th district, author of the original legislation, served as Chair of the Study Committee. The other Senate members included:

- Senator Jennifer Jordan of the 6th;
- Senator Ed Harbison of the 15th;
- Senator Burt Jones of the 25th; and
- Senator Sally Harrell of the 40th.

The following legislative staff members were assigned to this Committee: Kessarin Horvath of the Senate Press Office; Keelin Cronin of the Senate Research Office; Meaghan Kelling, Legislative Assistant to Senator Rahman, and Michael Walker of the Office of Legislative Counsel.

COMMITTEE MEETINGS

Meeting 1 - September 2, 2021

The Committee's first meeting took place at the Georgia State Capitol. This meeting was meant to serve as a primer on and introduction to outdoor learning and its various benefits for both children and educators. Testimony was heard from the following individuals:

- Sarah Milligan - Toffler, President & CEO of the Children & Nature Network;
- Zipa Vokhiwa - Professor, Mercer University and Co-Chair of the Council on Outdoor Learning;
- Suzannah Koilpillai - Vice President of Growth and Partnerships, OutTeach;
- Daryll Haddock - Chair of ECO and Program Director of Outdoor Activity Center, West Atlanta Watershed Alliance;
- Laurene Hamilton - Vice President of Programs, Greening Youth Foundation;
- Jacki Harp – REI;
- Randy DuTeau - Sports Strategies;
- Durrell Smith - Founder, Minority Alliance and Gun Dog Notebook;
- Ashley Rouse - Director of Project Learning Garden & Project Giving Gardens of the Captain Planet Foundation;
- Sean Splawski - Teacher, Mableton Elementary, Cobb County Public Schools; and
- Karan Wood - Executive Director of the Environmental Education Alliance.

Chairman Rahman opened the meeting by discussing the drastic changes to Georgian life as a result of the pandemic. He stated that outdoor learning is being used in several states across the country as a method to get students back to safe, in person learning. According to Senator Rahman, although outdoor activities creates 1.8 billion dollars in tax revenue, participation is declining.

Sarah Milligan-Toeffler, President and CEO of the Children and Nature Network (CNN), testified that on average, children spend as little as 10 minutes per day outside, which results in negative impacts on their health. Children who play outdoors are more active and physically fit than those who do not, and recent studies have shown a 20 percent increase in nearsightedness and myopia for children who do not get adequate outdoor exposure. Although adults have turned to parks and green space during the pandemic, outdoor time for children has actually decreased as a result of online home instruction for school work and parents working from home. Ms. Milligan-Toeffler also discussed the benefits to outdoor play, which includes problem solving skills, increased self-esteem, and a sense of agency. It also increases academic performance, especially for those children who already have barriers to academic success.

Sen. Harbison asked Ms. Milligan-Toeffler about the impact the growth of computer gaming has on kids staying indoors. Ms. Milligan-Toeffler indicated that gaming does impact the amount of time children spend outside, but it is less about one particular cause than it is about the combination of all the origins of screen time such as phone usage and online schooling. The more high tech society becomes, the more nature we need. She believes the biggest current issue is the lack of safe, comfortable outdoor space.

Zipa Vokhiwa, a Professor at Mercer University and Co-Chair of the Council on Outdoor Learning, explained that everything being equal, outdoor learning is not only about changing the setting but about changing the way students learn to a more engaging learning process. This results in higher

test scores and better understanding for the students. Outdoor learning in these engaging environments builds confidence and assists with professional development.

Sen. Harrell asked whether the state would benefit from having college degrees in this area, and whether higher education programs already exist to that extent. Professor Vokhiwa explained that there is no designated outdoor learning degree, however, environmental science degrees involve the outdoors in their curriculum. He also stated that the education program at Mercer University encourages teaching outdoors.

Suzannah Koilpillai, Vice President of Growth and Partnerships at OutTeach testified about transforming STEM science education in the country. Ms. Koilpillai stated that without engagement in STEM sciences, children are unlikely to be interested in STEM careers. She also addressed the underrepresentation of women, persons of color, and rural communities in those fields. Outdoor learning serves as a path to closing these gaps. Only one-third of elementary teachers, however, feel prepared to teach science, and only 38 percent have access to appropriate facilities to do so. Outdoor learning improves that access and generally accelerates learning in all areas. Kids have a very hard time seeing themselves as scientists of any type without the exposure to STEM science education, and outdoor learning is an excellent pathway to achieve broad exposure.

Laurene Hamilton, Vice President of Programs at the Greening Youth Foundation, spoke on a similar subject and emphasized workforce development and diversity. Ms. Hamilton stated that although everyone has the opportunity to become an environmental steward and preserve the history of public spaces, children are much less likely to make such a choice without the knowledge these fields exist. Outdoor learning and engagement from a young age exposes kids to these areas and fosters their interest.

Darryll Haddock, the Program Director of Outdoor Activity Center, West Atlanta Watershed Alliance testified that outdoor learning is a very effective pathway to safe, in person education without the controversy surrounding the masks and vaccines. Another way to elevate outdoor learning is by adding “community science,” and local parks and ecosystems to the conversation. In his experience, students thrive on project based, problem solving activities. When those activities involve a problem or a project that impacts their local community, the children get to see immediate positive outcomes from their involvement which increases their investment. Often, students’ introduction to these issues is interdisciplinary and intergenerational, furthering their investment in the community as a whole. Mr. Haddock emphasized that exposure to the environmental workforce in this way (which kids may not otherwise know about) is another opportunity to avoid bad outcomes for local youth.

Jacki Harp, Human Resources Business Partner with REI testified regarding outdoor recreation during the pandemic. Due to the stay at home order, REI has observed a trend in increased outdoor recreation for adults and would like that to extend to children. Ms. Harp recommended forest schools¹ as an option to return to in person learning safely. She described her experience with her own child in a forest school, and emphasized the importance of informing young children about outdoor career options through similar experiences.

Randy DuTeau, VP of Community Strategy & Development at Sports Strategies testified about the economic benefits of outdoor sports and tourism. Mr. DuTeau stated that even during economic downturn, people continue to travel in order to take part in and watch sports and other outdoor

¹ Forest schooling is an outdoor education delivery model in which students visit natural spaces to learn personal, social and technical skills. For more information, visit <https://forestschoolassociation.org/what-is-forest-school/>.

activities. He emphasized the importance of exposure to natural areas while involved in sports activities.

Durrell Smith, founder of the Minority Outdoor Alliance, testified regarding the impact of educating kids outdoors. He had three specific points: 1) Outdoor learning makes sense both pre and post Covid. It improves educational outcomes, and opens kids up to numerous different job opportunities. He used himself as an example of someone who fostered a relationship with nature as a child and created his own job when he saw a gap that needed to be addressed. 2) Currently, kids are spending 90 percent of their time indoors, mostly in front of a screen. This negatively impacts both their physical and mental well-being. 3) In addition to the positive impact on students, outdoor learning positively benefits educators. When educators are outdoors teaching, they also reap the stress-relieving benefits which leads to less burnout.

Ashley Rouse, Director of Project Learning Garden & Project Giving Gardens of the Captain Planet Foundation, testified on the benefit of community gardens and gardening generally for children. Outdoor learning labs which focus on growing food connects kids to the origin of their food. These kids are more likely to try different fruits and vegetables if they are grown from seeds they plant. This phenomenon snowballs to grow a community of adults who see the benefit of eating fresh, local foods and who are environmental stewards. She reiterated Ms. Milligan-Toeffler's sentiment and stated that the more high tech society becomes, the more we need to ground ourselves in nature.

Sean Splawski, a teacher at Mableton Elementary testified about his success with engaging kids outdoors and the positive effects he has seen. Mr. Splawski stated that in addition to the Covid pandemic, the United States is also facing a childhood obesity pandemic. In the past year, the country saw a 9.5 percent increase in childhood obesity, resulting in 45 percent of five to eleven year old children now obese. His passion for outdoor learning is rooted in this problem, and he established the school garden to combat it. He has personally seen his students work towards better grades and better health as a result, and would like to see increased outdoor engagement implemented throughout the state.

Karan Wood, Executive Director of the Environmental Education Alliance, closed the meeting by describing different organizations and institutions across Georgia which are involved in getting children outside and engaged in outdoor, project based learning, including the Elachee Nature Center, the Fernbank Museum, the Paidea School, and High Meadows. She emphasized this outdoor learning was possible because the teachers and instructors realized the benefits of outdoor learning and had the ability to implement it. She stated the challenge is bringing this outdoor learning to kids all across Georgia, and she appreciated the investment of the Committee in this topic.

Meeting 2 - October 18, 2021

The Committee held its second meeting at the Georgia State Capitol to explore different options for increasing access to outdoor learning across the state. Testimony was heard from:

- Jeff Turner, Georgia College and State University Associate Professor of Outdoor Learning;
- Marc Berejka, REI Director of Government Affairs;
- Katherine Moore, President of the GA Conservancy;
- Karen Garland, Co-Chair of Council of Outdoor Learning;
- Charmaine Godley, Children and Nature Network;

- George Dusenbury, Southern Hub Director for the Trust For Public Land; and
- Karan Wood, Executive Director for the Environmental Education Alliance.

Senator Rahman opened the meeting by briefly recapping his visits to sites around the state involving outdoor learning and nature engagement, and the site visits attended in the morning before this meeting took place. He was very impressed with what he has seen so far in places like the Elachee Nature Center in Gainesville, Georgia.

Professor Jeff Turner, a Georgia College and State University Associate Professor of Outdoor Learning, discussed his ideas for ways to increase access to outdoor learning. As background, he pointed out that there is currently no outdoor professional credential. Instead, most outdoor professionals are self-taught, and he wants to focus on ways to support practitioners with additional training. Many colleges and universities in Georgia have teaching programs, however, outdoor learning is not a major focus of these programs. Regarding outdoor specific degree programs, there are two available in public institutions (a minor in outdoor education at Georgia College and a program in outdoor recreation at Georgia Southern) and two in private institutions (outdoor leadership and education at Toccoa Falls College, and outdoor study at Young Harris College). Professor Turner would like to more explicitly focus on outdoor learning in teaching programs, create rewards for utilizing outdoor learning, and implement greater support and interconnectedness between private organizations working towards these goals.

Senator Harrell asked Professor Turner to explain the difference between environmental science degrees and outdoor learning degrees. Professor Turner stated that environmental science degrees are focused more on the traditional science of discovery. These degrees have very little emphasis on advocacy or methods for conveying that science to laymen or children. Senator Rahman was interested in the enrollment size of the outdoor education minor at Georgia College. Professor Turner said in the most recent year, 12 students graduated with the minor, due partially to the fact that minors don't have the same visibility that majors do.

Marc Berejka, Director of Government Affairs at REI, testified regarding the utility of creating an Office of Outdoor Recreation. These offices have proven to be very valuable in other states to stitch together government offices in best optimizing the states' natural resources and assets. Especially in a state like Georgia with such a broad range of natural environments, an office which breaks down silos between different agencies and organizations to more efficiently emphasize the outdoor space in this state could be highly useful.

Katherine Moore, President of the Georgia Conservancy, also testified on the creation of a state level Office of the Outdoors to elevate the opportunity the outdoors represents to a state level. Currently, there are 17 states with an Office of Outdoor Recreation and three have Outdoor Recreation Task Forces. She emphasized the importance of the outdoors for Georgia's economy, pointing out that the direct effect of the film industry amounted to \$4 billion dollars of consumer spending annually, while outdoor recreation amounts to \$27.3 billion dollars in consumer spending annually. Further, more jobs in Georgia depend on outdoor recreation than the auto industry. A state level office would serve to further optimize this industry and create even more economic opportunity for the state surrounding the outdoors.

Senator Rahman asked about the difference between an Outdoor Task Force and an Office of Outdoor Recreation. Ms. Moore stated that the task forces are states which had a state level entity to work on similar issues as an Office of Outdoor Recreation, but those states had not fully funded or designated

these task forces as offices. Senator Rahman was also interested in whether any states have an Office of Outdoor Education specifically. Ms. Moore was not aware of any, but that Georgia has an opportunity to create a more holistic and inclusive office different from those in other states.

Karen Garland, Co-Chair of the Council of Outdoor Learning, spoke from the perspective of being a K-5 science teacher. She focused on the value of field trips and outdoor classes, with or without a formal outdoor classroom. Field trips are frequently underfunded, but serve as an important link for students who do not otherwise have the opportunity to experience the outdoors. They present unique opportunities to introduce students to teambuilding, collaboration, and critical thinking in new outdoor environments. She also emphasized that many teachers do not understand the opportunities presented by simply taking a classroom outside – Ms. Garland stated that outdoor classrooms do not require benches or chalkboards. Ms. Garland believes it is important to bring students outside for better learning experiences, either by funding field trips to nature centers or other outdoor excursions or by opening the door of the classroom to take advantage of the surrounding environment.

Charmaine Godley, the Health and Nature Fellow for the Children and Nature Network, testified about the importance of all Georgian children having access to the benefits of nature based outdoor learning, especially those with the greatest need due to societal inequities. She suggests the Committee recommend a statewide outdoor learning needs assessment. Such an assessment would assist the state in evaluating where outdoor investment is most needed. The Southeastern Environmental Education Alliance recently completed a similar analysis which could serve as an excellent launch point for deeper research.

George Dusenbury, the Southern Hub Director for the Trust for Public Land, testified about the importance of access to parks and public land. Initially, Mr. Dusenbury reiterated the earlier suggestion to create an Office of the Outdoors to build healthy communities, enhance opportunities for outdoor learning, and increase rural prosperity. He also suggested schoolyards be redesigned so they are open to the public outside of school hours and include features that schools and communities need. Less than one percent of schoolyards are open to the public, and by redesigning these schoolyards for public use, a park would be within a 10-minute walk of more than 19 million people. Senator Harbison discussed the MLK Outdoor Learning Trail, located in Columbus, Georgia, and described its location and learning stations. He believes this the trail is a tremendous learning opportunity for children.

Karan Wood, Executive Director for the Environmental Education Alliance, stated the importance of engaging every student in regular, meaningful outdoor learning including outdoor learning based curriculum, field trips, and immersive residential outdoor learning programs. To achieve this goal, she suggests creating a grant program that would increase educator capacity, improve learning spaces at schoolyards and nature centers, and fund travel and costs of visiting nature centers or hosting nature-related programs at school. She also said there should be increased focus on effective planning, leadership, and collaboration between agencies and organizations promoting outdoor learning, which could be facilitated by a state-level Office of the Outdoors.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Through the Committee's process, hearing expert testimony and studying examples of outdoor learning environments both at schools and otherwise, the Committee determined that engagement with the outdoors has an extremely positive effect when implemented both in a school and an extra-curricular setting. After substantial discussion and review, the Committee finds a need to emphasize outdoor learning opportunities and generally increase access to the outdoors for both children and young adults. Thus, the Committee recommends the following:

1. The Study Committee encourages an explicit focus on outdoor learning in teaching programs, the creation of rewards for educators choosing to utilize outdoor learning, and the implementation of greater support and interconnectedness between private organizations working towards these goals.
2. The Study Committee encourages the creation of an "Office of the Outdoors" in order to optimize outdoor learning, engagement, and recreation efforts across state government departments and with non-state partners.
3. The Study Committee encourages funding or other support to ensure that each Georgia child participates in regular, meaningful outdoor learning experiences on campus as well as field trips to natural areas, outdoor learning facilities, and/or residential environmental education centers.
4. The Study Committee encourages the support of green school ground pilots around the state to evaluate what success looks like in a state wide implementation.
5. The Study Committee encourages the creation of a grant program available to both schools and non-profit providers of outdoor learning and environmental education that would increase educator capacity through educator training and teaching supplies, improve learning spaces at schoolyards and nature centers, and fund travel to and costs of visiting nature centers or hosting nature-related programs at school.
6. The Study Committee encourages Georgia College & State University to reinstitute the Outdoor Education B.S. degree, to allow faculty to guide students in learning about how to establish new outdoor recreational outlets, thus leading to job and industry growth.
7. The Study Committee encourages the inclusion of an ongoing program similar to "The MLK Jr. Outdoor Learning Trail," in Columbus, Georgia, in student's curriculum statewide. Students should have the opportunity to engage in nature, civics, and gardening as a result.

Respectfully Submitted,

**THE FINAL REPORT OF THE SENATE OUTDOOR LEARNING
STUDY COMMITTEE (SR 203)**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sheikh Rahman".

Senator Sheikh Rahman – Committee Chairman

District 5