

A photograph of a sunlit forest. Sunlight filters through the tall, thin trees, creating a bright, hazy glow in the upper center. In the foreground, a mossy path leads through the woods. Two children are running towards the camera: a girl in a green jacket on the left and a boy in a dark shirt on the right. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

LEARNING ON THE LAND

A District Approach to
Wellness and Connection

CHERYL LENARDON

Stepping Outside Together in Cariboo–Chilcotin School District

In Cariboo–Chilcotin School District, we are embracing a simple and powerful strategy to support the mental health and well-being of students and staff: spending meaningful time outdoors. Our district sits within an incredible natural landscape, with direct access to wooded areas, trails, and wild spaces from almost every school site. As spring begins to emerge, with longer afternoons, returning birdsong, and the first signs of thaw, these surroundings offer calm, perspective, and connection. A walk under the trees, the shift of the season, the sharing of stories, or even a moment spent noticing small wonders can help regulate stress, strengthen relationships, and restore balance. Time outside reminds us that well-being grows when we move, breathe, and feel rooted in the places where we live and learn. This is the spirit of wellness and connection that we are proud to nurture.

Growing a District Culture of Outdoor Learning

Our commitment to outdoor learning and well-being is firmly rooted in our district's strategic plan. Place-connected experiences are identified as a key focus area for success, resilience, belonging, and mental health. Time outdoors is not an occasional break or a subject-specific approach. It is a regular and intentional practice that supports whole person wellness and enriches learning across all disciplines. Our local environment makes this not only possible but natural.

Across the district, schools and worksites are bringing this vision to

life by stepping outside with purpose, weaving outdoor time into daily routines, and sharing the positive impacts on mood, engagement, and community. As this work continues, it aligns directly with our district wide mental health plan, which strengthens well-being through prevention, support, and everyday practices that cultivate healthy school communities.

Aligning Our Values and Our Landscape

Our mental health plan is simple by design. It is clear, consistent, and grounded in the strengths of our district. Most importantly, it reinforces our belief that going outside helps us feel better, learn better, and connect more deeply with one another. Outdoor time is not an add-on. It is integrated through all three parts of our plan and is becoming a way of being in Cariboo–Chilcotin School District.

Our plan is built on three interconnected components: learning about mental health and social emotional learning, creating community, and learning on the land. Together, these support healthy schools and reflect our commitment to being nurtured by nature.

Learning About Mental Health and Social Emotional Learning

Learning about mental health and social emotional learning provides students and staff with the knowledge, language, and strategies needed to understand emotions, build resilience, and support one another. Our nurtured by nature approach is unique and well supported by research, although not yet reflected in BC's Mental Health In Schools Strategy or the

widely used provincial mental health training and programs.

To strengthen this work, Cariboo–Chilcotin School District has partnered with author and leader Monique Gray Smith, local clinicians Cindi Saj and Christa Smith, and Canadian Mental Health Association staff. Custom workshops and learning series highlight outdoor time as accessible, evidence-aligned enhancement to existing mental health supports. These after-school events, designed for social interaction and learning, have been enthusiastically attended by staff and community partners.

Creating Community

Creating community strengthens belonging through relationships, cultural connections, restorative practices, and collective responsibility. It ensures that every person feels connected, supported, and valued.

We continue to grow and diversify networks and learning communities by connecting staff to Take Me Outside, Classrooms 2 Communities, and the BCTF Environmental Educator Provincial Specialist Association (EPPSA), and by creating local communities of practice such as Mentorship in the Wild with author and facilitator Court Rustemeyer. District events, including a virtual Winter Warmer Wellness evening, spring outdoor Gathering of Hope, and end of summer District Day picnics, provide ongoing opportunities to gather as colleagues. As the season shifts, these community-building moments feel both timely and natural.

Learning on the Land

Learning on the land brings the components of our mental health plan together. Time in nature supports regulation, calm, curiosity, and connection to place. The warmer days of spring create even more opportunities to take learning outside. District schools are proud to share examples of shared protocols and practices:

Circle Routines

“At Big Lake School, staff and students begin their daily routine gathered in a welcoming circle, creating a shared space for connection, grounding, and collective wellness. After setting a positive tone together, the group enjoys a refreshing walk along the accessibility trail by the lake and around the community hall, taking in the natural beauty while building community through movement. To close the day, everyone returns to the circle to reflect on their experiences, celebrate moments of learning, and express gratitude - ending the day with a sense of calm, connection, and belonging” - Sari Small, Principal

Ceremony and Traditional Practices

“We guide members of our learning communities towards an understanding of the deeply meaningful interconnections we share with all those that grow, fly, swim, crawl, and slither on good mother earth. How our actions/inactions can impact others, creating space for respectful and introspective learning far exceeding the confines and limitations of indoor learning spaces. The exciting opportunities experienced by connecting with who we are on the land is an exceptional way to spend time together for our health and environment! If we choose to support learning through medicinal food and plant exploration plus the

repair and cultivation of growing sites, we simultaneously cultivate repair and positive growth in our learning communities” - Dancing Water Sandy, District Vice-Principal of Indigenous Education.

School Wide Walks

“With Spring around the corner, drier ground cover, and the start of new life, Cataline Elementary is excited to expand our morning walk routine, venturing even further around the school and school grounds. Morning walks provide a welcoming soft start to each day, connecting students, staff, and community in a good way. This walk allows staff and students to connect and reconnect through exercise and fresh air, supporting our Social Emotional Learning efforts and staff and student mental health” - Dwayne Benvin, Principal

Moving Meetings Outside

Columnetza Junior Secondary School leadership recognizes the benefits of the embedded outdoor practice at their feeder schools: *“building on familiar routines we are introducing short ‘soft start’ walk-and-talks to staff meetings where staff move together while checking in about learning goals, challenges, or upcoming tasks, and holding brief outdoor check-in circles during first block for students and staff to reset, connect socially, and build a sense of belonging. This continuity also reinforces the message that outdoor time is not a novelty, but a regular, intentional practice woven across the district to support wellness for all learners”* - Holly Zurak, Principal.

Nature Based SEL Team

A new informal district learning team brings together all three directions of our mental health plan. This fall, teachers engaged in a four-part professional learning series to explore nature-based social emotional learning through playful



outdoor experiences. The presenters facilitated a follow up district session and teachers received resources and ongoing support to continue sharing practice. This capacity building complements the Cariboo–Chilcotin Teachers Association’s plan to host an April professional development day and learning round demonstration.

100 Mile Elementary School is involved with the team and shares budding new practice with the spring launch of a school wide approach to nature based SEL focused on the early years. *“In the primary years, experiences such as sensory scavenger hunts—where*

students explore using sight, sound, touch, and smell—help children slow their bodies, build focus, and develop emotional awareness in developmentally appropriate ways. Together, these strategies form a consistent, research informed approach that strengthens belonging, regulation, and positive relationships that will help them as they move through their lives” - Crystal Dawn Langton, Principal

Closing Invitation

As the season opens and more learning naturally shifts outdoors, we invite you to visit our district website to explore the many seasonal stories of success emerging across Cariboo–Chilcotin School District. There you will find examples of place based, land based, and outdoor learning shared by schools who are embracing this way of being. We also extend an open call to fellow educators near and far: connect with us, draw inspiration from our practices, and join us in exploring how time on the land can strengthen wellness and learning for all.



BIO
CHERYL
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Cheryl Lenardon is the superintendent of Cariboo Chilcotin School District, located across the spectacular unceded territories of the Secwepemc, Tsilhqot'in, and Dakelh Nations. While the Cariboo is the place she now calls home, Cheryl's roots stretch from Northern Ontario to the Peace and Kootenay regions of British Columbia. Over more than 30 years in K-12 education, including 15 in district leadership, she has worked alongside educators, students, and communities to make outdoor and place based learning a vibrant and everyday part of school life. Supporting this work, and watching it grow in two districts, remains one of her greatest professional joys.

