

Case Study of the Cloudberry Forest School Project¹

Informing Early Learning and Child Care Legislation in Newfoundland and Labrador

How it worked

This project, part of the **Lawson Foundation Outdoor Play Strategy 2.0**, explored changes to provincial legislation in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) that would allow outdoor-based programs such as Forest and Nature Schools to operate as licensed Early Learning and Child Care programs (ELCCs).

The NL government provided Cloudberry Forest School² with an exemption to operate as a full-time ELCC so that Cloudberry could serve as a learning lab. Officials could visit the program in action—to learn, dialogue about practice and policy, and conduct mock inspections—and use their learning and experiences to inform policy recommendations.

Project evaluators reviewed similar policies in other jurisdictions; identified current practices at Cloudberry that did and did not meet existing regulations for ELCC; and determined the changes that would be required in legislation (ultimately for a new licensing category) and in different, intersecting policy domains for Forest and Nature School programs to be licensed as ELCCs. Evaluators also observed and gathered perspectives from Cloudberry staff and from families of children in the program.

The project team met regularly with senior policy officials in the Department of Education and several times with key representatives of the Department of Digital Government and Service NL to understand the context of the key departments implicated and to share evaluation findings as they emerged. The team also briefed cabinet ministers in these departments.

Impact

Cloudberry's operation as a learning lab for visitors, supported by evaluation activities to gather the perspectives of educators, parents, policymakers and regulatory officers, demonstrated what is possible. The gathering of licensing models from other jurisdictions, and detailed analysis of the gaps to be addressed to license a Forest and Nature School, clarified the task at hand and created a roadmap to regulation. Dialogue about the potential for new regulations was ongoing at the conclusion of the project.

¹This case study is a knowledge mobilization product developed alongside: Andrew Taylor, Laine Bourassa, Ben Liadsky, and Amy Ellard-Gray. The Power of a Relational, Values-Driven Approach to Building Adult Capacity: Final Evaluation Report of Outdoor Play Strategy 2.0. Toronto: Lawson Foundation, June 2024. Available at: <https://lawson.ca/BAC.pdf>

²In 2024, after the project had concluded, Cloudberry Forest School transitioned into a nonprofit organization, now operating as the Cloudberry Outdoor Play and Education Centre.

Lessons learned

- Building strong working relationships with core partners (i.e., Cloudberry staff, project evaluators, government officials) was key to progress.
- Extensive use of experiential, relationship-building strategies set the stage for provincial policy change, by doing things like inviting politicians, government policymakers and regulatory officers to visit Cloudberry and experience a Forest and Nature School program in person.
- Regular sharing of evaluation findings helped build a clear understanding of Forest and Nature School within the Ministry of Education ELCC policy division. However, engagement with the department responsible for inspecting ELCCs (Digital Government and Service NL) was limited to exploratory visits and discussions. While many policymakers saw the possibility of creating new policy, those who implemented existing policies (i.e., regulatory officers) identified challenges. Sustained collaboration would be needed to advance the work.
- The project evaluation documented how intersecting policies and regulations from different government departments apply and must be considered in potential new regulations.
- The importance of educator qualifications became an increasing focus of discussion in the latter months of the project, leading to an appreciation that Forest and Nature School programs for young children warrant both ECE certification and specialized Forest and Nature School training. In response, Cloudberry developed a pilot training course.



Trying to license outdoor-based programs with an existing facility-based paradigm is like trying to put a square peg in a round hole.

For example, existing policy in Newfoundland and Labrador requires all licensed ELCCs to have multiple learning centres, such as a block area and a sandbox, and government regulatory officers were inclined to recommend those same things at Cloudberry. However, a Forest and Nature School program focuses on providing a diversity of loose parts on an emergent basis in response to children's interests; further, opportunities to build and dig come naturally in rich outdoor environments and do not necessarily require a sandbox. Therefore, outdoor-based programs need a distinct set of regulations specific to their context.

For more information on what was learned through Canada's first demonstration project for licensing a new category of outdoor-based ELCC, read the final evaluation report *Informing the Road to Regulation* at <https://tinyurl.com/3fa6mymb>, available in three volumes, by Dr. David Philpott and Janet Miller Pitt.

ELCC without walls or fences.

*Photo by Tristan Oliff
courtesy of Cloudberry
Forest School*

