



Trailblazers:

Promoting Outdoor
Play After School

2015

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With the support of:



District of Lunenburg
Trailblazers
Outdoor Kids Club



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Winter photos by Béatrice Schuler Photography



Introduction

What is Trailblazers?

Trailblazers is an outdoors after school program offered by the Municipality of the District of Lunenburg (MODL). The program takes place in wooded areas on or adjacent to school property at rural and community schools in Lunenburg County. Trailblazers is offered to children in grades 4 through 7. The group's age demographic varies depending on the grades offered at each participating school. The program is provided free of charge to all participants, and includes a nutritious snack each day.

By providing school-aged children the opportunity to play outdoors, Trailblazers serves as an antidote to falling rates of physical activity amongst our children. The physical activity levels of Nova Scotian children have been steadily decreasing in recent years. In 2011 the Active Healthy Kids Canada Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth reported that children are increasingly sedentary, particularly during the after school period (3pm to 6pm)¹. The 2015 ParticipACTION report card on physical activity for children and youth has reported that only 9% of Canadian children aged 5-17 years old are getting the 60 minutes of heart-pumping activity they require each day².

But the good news is that the health, social, and environmental benefits of nature-based play have been well-documented. One study reported that children who experience school grounds with diverse natural settings are more physically active, more aware of nutrition, more civil to one another and more creative (Bell and Dymont 2008)³. Another study has reported that children who play in natural environments "demonstrate resilience, self-regulation and develop skills for dealing

with stress later in life" (ParticipACTION 2015:5)⁴. Finally, grades 5 and 6 students who are regularly allowed to go outside and explore unsupervised get 20% more heart-pumping activity than those who are always supervised (Ibid. 2015:3)⁵.

Knowing this, the goals of the Trailblazers program are to: increase participants' physical activity, develop their outdoor and leadership skills, and foster a stronger connection with the natural world. The program's objectives are to:

- be outdoors for 2.5 hours during the after school period no matter the weather,
- incorporate structured and unstructured activities including; free play, outdoor skill building activities, games, and nature awareness activities,
- demonstrate that little material is required to have fun in an outdoor setting.

Trailblazers hopes to continue offering kids in Lunenburg County the chance to be physically active while exploring the natural world.

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to tell the tale of Trailblazers through the stories of students who participated in the program. By providing qualitative accounts of students' experiences, we hope to demonstrate that Trailblazers has made a positive impact on those who have taken part, and that the program has met its stated objectives and goals. The report also contains reflections on the program from Trailblazers instructors, from the principals of participating schools, and from a parent. Social worker and writer Brené Brown contends that "maybe stories are

1 Active Healthy Kids Canada. 2011. Don't let this be the most physical activity our kids get after school. The Active Healthy Kids Canada 2011 Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth, Active Healthy Kids Canada, Toronto.

2 ParticipACTION. 2015. ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth. Retrieved from <http://www.participation.com/report-card-2015/report-card/>

3 Dymont, J.E. & Bell, A.E. 2008. Grounds for Movement: green school grounds as sites for promoting physical activity. Health Education Research; 6:952-962

4 ParticipACTION. 2015. ParticipACTION Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Youth. Retrieved from <http://www.participation.com/report-card-2015/report-card/>

5 Ibid.

just data with a soul” (Brown 2010)⁶. By allowing the children to discuss the program in their own voice, we hope their stories speak louder than any quantitative analysis of the program would do.

The stories and reflections in this report are divided into three sections: the first from Trailblazers students, the second from Trailblazers instructors, and the third from principals from participating schools and from a parent of a Trailblazers student.

Methodology

Between April and June of 2015, focus groups were conducted at three of the seven participating schools. The goal of each focus group was to capture participants’

experiences in the program through story telling. Selection for the focus group sites was random, and in each location a significant portion of Trailblazer students from the current session attended. The questions asked during the focus groups were designed to address the projected goals and objectives of the Trailblazers program. Each focus group was recorded using a digital voice recorder, and the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim.

Parents of Trailblazers and the principals at participating schools were asked to submit written reflections on the program. Trailblazer instructors were also asked to share their written reflections on the program from their intimate vantage point on the ground, in the woods with the children throughout the seasons.

6 Brown, Brené. 2010. The Power of Vulnerability. TED Talks. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en



Stories from the Forest: Student Reflections on Trailblazers

Trailblazers Favourites

From Earth education lessons that encourage children to discover the multitude of colours of the forest by matching marbles to lichens, stones, berries and bark to large games and self-directed fort building, Trailblazers students were busy exploring and learning all through the school year. Of the many activities that Trailblazers participated in, they favoured games that involved strategies like running, hiding and sneaking, and those that provided experiential learning opportunities.



One such game was the Animal Game, a game with a large field of play in which children role-play herbivores, omnivores and carnivores. Each group of animals has a specific survival goal; the herbivores to collect water and food tags from throughout the forest, the omnivores to collect water and food tags, but also life tags from the herbivores, and the carnivores to collect water tags and life tags from the other animals. The game is fast paced and exciting and offers players a glimpse into the difficulties of animal survival. Of the Animal Game, Keagan said, "I was a carnivore. It was very nice to be a carnivore because I felt powerful". This feeling of power was also experienced by Stella who said, "I liked when we played the Animal Game because I was a carnivore so I couldn't get harmed unless by forest fire or the hunter". But it wasn't only students who played carnivores who enjoyed the game, those who played herbivores and omnivores liked playing too, despite the challenges they faced during the game. Sarah from Bayview Community School said, "I liked the game, even though I felt useless as a herbivore".

During the winter session, the Trailblazers at West Northfield Elementary developed their own animal survival game. Under the leadership of grade 6 student Justin, the students worked together to establish the rules and strategies for what came to be known as "Justin's Animal Game". The game involved pairs of animals working in teams to create a shelter and survive the winter by scavenging food and preying upon the other animals. It encouraged teamwork and creativity and it was a huge hit for the children. When asked what inspired him, game creator Justin replied, "I thought that lots of people have favourite animals and they like to partner up, so I thought

"I thought that lots of people have favourite animals and they like to partner up, so I thought it would be a fun survival game. I thought we might like to take a trip out of our normal human life and go into an animal's body and see what it's like".

— Justin, student

it would be a fun survival game. I thought we might like to take a trip out of our normal human life and go into an animal's body and see what it's like". Justin's game is a great example of the spirit of cooperation and creativity that thrives during Trailblazers. The success of the game also speaks to the children's desire to learn experientially, to learn about animals by becoming those animals.

Trailblazers students also enjoyed outdoor skill-building activities like fire building and shelter making. Although challenging in their execution, these activities helped the students feel more comfortable in the forest and provided a sense of empowerment. Outdoor skills were taught both by Trailblazers instructors and by guest instructor, Sam Wentzell, a local Search and Rescue Technician. Emelia spoke highly of the experience, "We got to act together as if we were really lost and we got to go out and gather the right sized logs and sticks. It was really fun because we got to build a shelter and discover new ways to light a fire and how to survive.



“I like making fire and eating what we cooked over it. Normally I’m not allowed to make fires because my parents don’t trust me with fire. But now they do and I’m allowed to make fires”.

– Ethan, student

setting the match on fire and keeping it alive”. When asked about her preparedness for lighting a fire on her own, Morgan responded, “From 1 to 10, I’d say I’m about a 7 or 8”. Ethan explained that he is now able to make fires at home because of the fire building skills he learned in Trailblazers, “I like making fire and eating what we cooked over it. Normally I’m not allowed to make fires because my parents don’t trust me with fire. But now they do and I’m allowed to make fires”.

Trailblazers Challenges

When asked what they didn’t like about Trailblazers, answers like Jennifer’s were common, “I don’t really know my least favourite activity, because I liked it all”. Interestingly, questions concerning the activities they didn’t enjoy elicited responses concerning student behaviours that were disruptive to the group. Emelia said, “But my least favourite thing was probably not really the activities or anything, but sometimes people would fight over positions and stuff in general and sometimes people don’t listen and it makes it harder for other people when instructions are being given to listen in and they want to enjoy it as much as the other people do. And I don’t think it’s really fair because it takes away from the time and stuff”.

Students at another school felt the same way. They described how because they only met with their Trailblazers instructors once a week, some students felt they could get away with behaviours that would not be accepted in class. These behaviours sometimes

It was really fun to have a Search and Rescue person come in and actually explore these new things with us”. While describing her experience with these skill-building activities, Morgan demonstrated her knowledge, “I found that birch bark sometime works and sometimes doesn’t work. The first time we did it, it was a little wet but it burned all right. Another hard thing was

took away from the experience of other students in the group. Without knowing it, these students were addressing one of the largest challenges faced by Trailblazer instructors: meeting with the children only once a week sometimes made it difficult to establish meaningful relationships with students and thus created an environment in which some students behaved as if classroom style discipline did not apply. To counter this, instructors made group expectations clear from the outset of each program and disruptive behaviour was disciplined when necessary. As Shaelynn explained, the expectations of Trailblazers were always very clearly stated and enforced. “I think that’s something good about Trailblazers, you don’t get away with doing something not very good. There are lots of responsibilities and boundaries as a Trailblazer and you have to deal with it”.

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– Shaelynn, student



When asked about what they would change about Trailblazers, the students replied with answers concerning the logistical aspects of program. Some students were disappointed that Trailblazers occurred on days that conflicted with their other extra-curricular activities such as cross-country running and drama club. Some students wished that the program could run more than once a week at their schools. Others wished that the program ran longer each day. Because of this, the program length was extended to 2.5 hours during the Spring 2015 session.

Connecting with the Natural World

To varying degrees, all Trailblazers students felt that the program helped them connect with the natural world. For students who already played outside on a regular basis, the new connection was not as pronounced as it was for those who had previously spent more time indoors. However, they all expressed a feeling of gratitude for the time they spent playing outdoors during the program.

For one student at Newcombville Elementary the new feeling of connection that she felt to nature translated to a feeling of pride and ownership over the places in the forest that were integral to the program. **“I’m so used to being in the school five days a week and when I go out into the woods it’s like it’s a new day, a new life, it’s like you just walk into another dimension. One of my favourite things about being in the woods was when winter was over all the forest floor was green”.**

— Morgan, student

“I just like it when we go in the woods, it’s kind of like our own little place, the spots we go,” said Shaelynn. “Like ‘Foodlandia’ (a favoured spot for snack time, deep in the woods), and ‘Fairy’s Meare’ (a large depression in the forest floor that was filled with water early in the Spring)”. For Morgan, leaving the school at the end of the day to venture out into the forest was an invigorating experience. Trailblazers allowed her to experience the changing seasons, which she described with a sense of

wonderment, “I’m so used to being in the school five days a week and when I go out into the woods it’s like it’s a new day, a new life, it’s like you just walk into another dimension. One of my favourite things about being in the woods was when winter was over all the forest floor was green”.

Several Trailblazers students explained that their experience in the program encouraged them to seek fun and entertainment in the natural environments that surround their homes as opposed to playing inside. Armed with a new tool kit of games and activities to play outside, these students felt enabled to adventure out on their own and with their peers. Emelia from West Northfield said, “Before Trailblazers I didn’t go out as much. But throughout the Trailblazers session I started to go out more, because it was like a prompt. Now I knew all these fun things that I could do and even when we learned about being lost, it would give me ideas of what to do. Now I play games about being lost and it prepares me



for if I ever really do get lost. It was super fun and really made me one with nature and it really connected me. I decided that I really love nature and it's a beautiful thing".

Brandon from the same school described how participating in Trailblazers helped shift his perception about the natural world. "I feel more comfortable going outside now because before I used to be like, oh nature, it's so dirty. But now I actually lay down in the dirt".

"I do feel more physically active now that I'm in Trailblazers because when my friends come over we usually sit inside and watch TV or play on our electronics. But now that I have cool Trailblazer games, we can go outside and I can teach them to my friends that aren't in Trailblazers and we can have fun".

– Shaelynn, student

For Shaelynn from Newcombsville, the connection that she made with nature during Trailblazers awakened in her a new love of physical activity, and also helped reduce her reliance on electronic games for fun. "I do feel more physically active now that I'm in Trailblazers because when my friends come over we usually sit inside and watch TV or play on our electronics. But now that I have cool Trailblazer games, we can go outside and I can teach them to my friends that aren't in Trailblazers and we can have fun".

The Benefits of Learning Outside

For many Trailblazers, the experience of learning outdoors was a highlight of the program. These students described how the feeling of open space and the sounds of the forest enhanced their learning experience. Katie from Bayview Community School said, "I liked being outside because it's relaxing because there's all the sounds of birds and bugs and maybe a river. It's just relaxing and then I can focus better". Froya enjoyed the physical movement that is integral to learning outside, "It's better than being indoors and playing technology because when you're outside you can learn some other stuff and you get active. When you're inside you're just staring at a screen all day". For Lily, being outside provided a sense of freedom, "I like being outside because in the classroom you're cramped with all kinds of people, but when you're outside there's a lot of space to run around".

The Social Benefits of Trailblazers

Trailblazer students reported that participating in the program gave them the opportunity to get to know students who they normally wouldn't have spent time with. In some cases, established social boundaries were broken and new friendships were formed. Justin from West Northfield Elementary said, "Some of the people who were my Trailblazers friends are now my friends outside of Trailblazers". Emelia was very inspired by the new friendships she made during Trailblazers, "But more recently I had been playing with the boys and we formed a bond and we started playing once a week and then twice a week. And now we play every recess and actually through





Trailblazers I grew closer to them and we've formed a brotherhood. It's kind of like the situation of don't judge a book by its cover – you saw them playing army games, but then when you actually join the games it's fun. I feel like my imagination has filled my entire body through Trailblazers and through hanging out with new people!"

Anna from Newcombsville Elementary described feeling closer to several other students, and how the intimate setting of the program helped her meet new friends, "Now I know that I can trust other kids because I became friends with them. Trailblazers is like a friend-friendly place. You only have a little group, so you have to interact with other people".

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– Anna, student

Healthy Eating

Each day Trailblazers instructors provided a balanced and healthy snack for the students. The snack provided was as organic and locally-sourced as possible, and always contained fruits or vegetables and a healthy source of protein. Some days

"I found the food was overall very healthy except the few treats we had along the way. The snacks were actually healthy, not like "ewwww" healthy, but they were yummy healthy I guess you could say. Not like spinach or kale".

– Katerina, student

the children were treated to a piece of chocolate or a pastry purchased from a local French bakery. Several students explained that the snacks provided during Trailblazers taught them that healthy food can be very delicious. Katerina from Bayview Community School put it best, "I found the food was overall very healthy except the few treats we had along the way. The snacks were

“People think they really want junk food, but nutritious food is really good when you’re out in the wilderness because it’s a two hour Trailblazers and nutritious food actually keeps you going, it doesn’t make you tired, so you’re always ready for what we’re going to do”.

– Hannah, student

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Many Trailblazers reported learning that healthy food sustains physical activity better than sugar-loaded junk foods. According to Hannah from West Northfield Elementary, “People think they really want junk food, but nutritious food is really good when you’re out in the wilderness because



it’s a two hour Trailblazers and nutritious food actually keeps you going, it doesn’t make you tired, so you’re always ready for what we’re going to do”. Finally, two students from Newcombsville Elementary described how the healthy eating habits they learned during the program changed the way that they eat at home. Shaelynn said, “It’s good, healthy good and it gives us more energy to run. When we go home we actually see that healthy food tastes good and we want to eat that”. Morgan gets the last word on this subject, “Trailblazers taught me a lot about healthy eating. If I had a bowl of mango in front of me and a chocolate cake, I think I might go for the mango because it’s good”.

Trailblazing in the Future

When asked if they would join the program again, all Trailblazers students answered with a resounding “YES!” The students’ enthusiasm for the program was infectious. Cole was very excited to offer his opinion on the program, “I would join again because it’s so awesome. It’s already at its peak level of awesomeness!” For a final reflection on Trailblazers, we end with Emelia. “I would absolutely join again because of everything that we’ve talked about today and because of the wonderful people instructing it and how kind they are and supporting. And I just love everything about it. There is literally nothing I could say wrong about it. It makes me teary eyed to think of a world without Trailblazers”.

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– Emelia, student

Stories from the Leaders: Instructors' Reflections on Trailblazers

When the District of Lunenburg decided to run an outdoor after school program, it was on a trial basis to use new funding opportunities. The overwhelming success of Trailblazers is a story worth telling, many times over.

Trailblazers is a perfect example of how you can look in your backyard (or school yard, in this case) and find endless recreation potential. With all this opportunity waiting to be explored, the trick with after school programming is to find the right leader.

— Tracy Vandermolen, coordinator

Since Trailblazers began, we have been fortunate to find enthusiastic leaders who connect with youth in a meaningful way. Our early Trailblazers program took more of a classic physical activity approach. However, our participants soon began to request more outdoor leadership skills. These skills were not as easily apparent with our leaders, and we had some resource stumbling blocks. But with the success of our first season, word began to spread, and we connected with an extensive network of passionate outdoor enthusiasts just waiting for a chance to share their knowledge.

Today, our Trailblazers leaders are what make the program a success. They have built its reputation as a program where youth feel welcome and free to explore the outdoors with confidence and a curious mind. My recommendation to anyone looking to start Trailblazers is to find leaders like these - whose memories of 'the best day spent outside' are always in their minds. If we have learned anything from

As Active Living Coordinator, my role is to increase physical activity levels of municipal residents. Due to the rural nature of our communities, I often promote the outdoors, taking advantage of the scenery and low-cost opportunities. Trailblazers is a perfect example of how you can look in your backyard (or school yard, in this case) and find endless recreation potential. With all this opportunity waiting to be explored, the trick with after school programming is to find the right leader.

Since Trailblazers began, we have been

High Five!, it's that the leaders make the difference, and it is worth the time and effort to seek them out. No amount of funding or paperwork can replace the attitudes of good quality leaders, and I can't speak highly enough of their work.

Tracy Vandermolen, Active Living Coordinator, MODL

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It was inspiring to see how the kids responded to being trusted with things that are sometimes considered a bit risky, such as fire-making. When they are supported to work through a challenge themselves, they become really engaged and pull together to help each other and share their new skills.

— Amanda Bostlund, instructor

It was inspiring to see how the kids responded to being trusted with things that are sometimes considered a bit risky, such as fire-making. When they are supported to work through a challenge themselves, they become really engaged and pull together to help each other and share their new skills.

One of my favourite times was when a youth in the group had an idea for a game he'd made up involving getting into small groups based

on what animals each person was interested in. They organized themselves this way, pretended to be that animal, and then built shelters. This evolved into all the "animals" running around and interacting with one another in the forest. What a great example of child-led learning stemming from imagination and physical activity in a natural setting!

Games and activities involving "child passions", such as running, sneaking, building, and hiding are always a hit. The kids have an amazing amount of energy, and the forest is a great place for it!

At one school particularly, the kids were so into their fort building, which spanned the seasons, that it felt like we (Trailblazers leaders) were hardly needed! Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that most kids have the freedom or time to organize themselves to play together in the forest, so I think supervised programs that are making this type of creative, outdoor play possible are doing a real service to today's youth.



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— Amanda Bostlund, instructor

I often felt both calm and inspired within the natural settings we were working in, and I think the kids feel this, too. Seeing a group of kids running around and laughing in the woods is one of the nicest things I can imagine.

Amanda Bostlund, Trailblazers Instructor, MODL

One of my most memorable moments from Trailblazers happened in the spring of 2015 at West Northfield Elementary School. We were in the middle of an Earth walk and I was leading the children through the forest, looking for an inspiring spot for our next activity. We came upon a grassy patch in the middle of a low-lying bog area. The spot felt right. We gathered in a circle, and I began to tell the children a story of how the many colours of the forest came to be. Just then, a beautiful garter snake slithered through the grass and stopped right in the middle of our circle.

The child who was the first to spot our reptilian visitor pointed to the middle of the circle and quietly said, “Look, a snake”. Cries of “holy smokes!” and a few “ewwwwwws” echoed around the circle, but all the children watched the snake with respect and reverence. For a good ten minutes we put our activity on hold to observe the snake in its natural habitat. The magic of the moment was that the snake did not slither away, but lingered in the tall grass, in the middle of our circle. It was a wonderful learning experience for all of us, one that resonated with the children for many weeks afterwards.

As an outdoor educator, it is moments like these that are my bread and butter. When we have a close encounter with a creature of the forest, time slips away, the social boundaries of the group dissolve, and we are offered an intimate glimpse of another

being’s life. Much of what we do as Trailblazers is busy, with games and activities that keep us moving. So quiet moments like our visit with the snake stand out as particularly special, a peaceful break from the business of our lives.

When we open the door to children’s education and give them a chance to learn out of doors, the natural world can present itself to us in ways for which we cannot completely prepare. In this scenario, my job as an educator was to step out of the way and let the snake be our teacher. And the snake did a wonderful job. The next time that we encountered a snake in the forest, the children were not scared or grossed out by it, but were very excited to be meeting with a familiar creature once again.

Britt Vegsund, Trailblazers Instructor, MODL

When we open the door to children’s education and give them a chance to learn out of doors, the natural world can present itself to us in ways for which we cannot completely prepare. In this scenario, my job as an educator was to step out of the way and let the snake be our teacher. And the snake did a wonderful job.

— Britt Vegsund, instructor



Stories from the Schools: Principals' and Parents' Reflections on Trailblazers

Trailblazers at Newcombville Elementary has provided our students with activities that have enabled our students to develop their independence, decision-making and social skills, and also their emotional skills. Trailblazers has been very instrumental in building up our student's character and values. They do this by creating and offering an atmosphere of creativity and enrichment under the direction of their caring, knowledgeable and positive adult role models.

As a school leader I also see the benefits of students being given the opportunity to be outside in natural surroundings. Research shows that outdoor activities may also be a big factor in improving our children's health. There is also evidence that both being outdoors, and surrounding ourselves in our natural physical environment, can reduce stress within our children.

Trailblazers is a program that offers our students the opportunity where they can be outdoors and be physically active on a regular basis within their own neighborhoods. I highly recommend this program.

Shannon Catton, Principal, Newcombville Elementary School

Trailblazers is an essential program for our connected kids of today, more than ever. I wish it could be run at Petite more than once a week. It combines group camaraderie, challenges, and fun, and the best part, all OUTSIDE!!! In addition the instructors show fun, patience and excitement to be with the kids. The students pick up on all those positive vibes. So thank you!

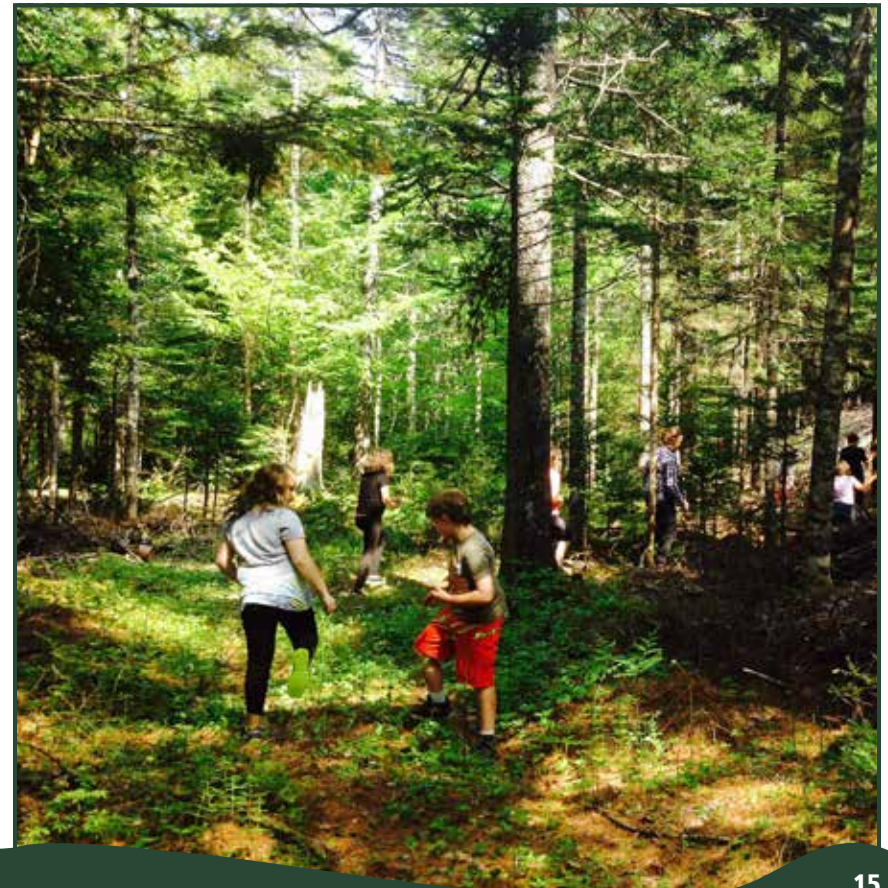
Leslie Jones, Principal, Petite Rivière Elementary School

Trailblazers is a program that offers our students the opportunity where they can be outdoors and be physically active on a regular basis within their own neighborhoods.

— Shannon Catton, principal

The Trailblazers Program offered to our students at West Northfield Elementary School is a much loved program. Our students enjoy this program immensely, no matter what the season. We believe this program impacts our students' ability to cooperate and resolve conflict. We believe this program has a positive impact on our students' self-esteem. As well, our students learn valuable outdoor skills, how to safely enjoy the environment, navigate the environment, appreciate the environment they live in and most importantly grow a love for being outdoors.

Deanna Rawding, Principal, West Northfield Elementary School



The skills they are learning (starting a fire in a safe way, cooking over a fire, orienteering), are all life long skills that meld a love for nature and just being outdoors in general and enjoying nature and all the magic that that entails.

— Natasha Pysh, parent

think I have on numerous occasions said that the municipality needs to structure a Trailblazers for adults!

The skills they are learning (starting a fire in a safe way, cooking over a fire, orienteering), are all life long skills that meld a love for nature and just being outdoors in general and enjoying nature and all the magic that that entails.

My daughter lives to be outside, so this program has been right up her alley. Just to reiterate, it's not a program where the kids are just being supervised, they are actively engaged and learning life long skills and appreciation for nature.

I think this is something that kids of all ages should have access to. I have a younger son, 8, and I know he would also benefit from and love this program. I sincerely hope that the program either expands to include younger ages, or is up and running when he is of the same age as his sister.

Natashia Pysh, Parent, Bayview Community School

The general consensus among Bayview parents, is...we LOVE IT! We all talk to each other and say what a great program Trailblazers is. I can speak for them all (because they told me), that it is such a great program. We feel truly blessed to have access to this kind of program in the South Shore and it's FREE!!

As for my daughter, she has come home after every single Trailblazers day truly enthusiastic and bubbling over with stories of what they did that day. I

