

Article after article will tell you about the benefits of being outdoors and everyone knows that getting kids outside and active in nature can only lead to good things, which begs the question: as community partners, how can we help encourage youth to get outside on trail?

One way to answer this question is to follow in the path of the Baille Ard Recreation Association and head right to the schools themselves!

How did Baille Ard accomplish this? They worked tirelessly at creating curriculum-based activities and partnering with afterschool programs.

Why create curriculum-based activities?

With a strong contingent of members who have a background in education, Baille Ard Recreation recognized how much time children spent in school but understood that if they wanted to bring classrooms onto their trails: they needed to show how these activities fit within the curriculum and they needed to make them easy to use.

The extensive and detailed collection of activities, which can all be found on the Baille Ard website, have done exactly this for the teachers of Sydney. They can quickly browse, explore and print off activities across all grade levels, which in turn saves them time and makes it easy to show how everything fits with their curriculum.

Baille Ard quickly realised that by saving educators time and demonstrating curricular outcomes they would increase the likelihood of schools visiting and more importantly re-visiting their trails every year!

How can activities be developed?

If you're looking to find some partners to get this process started, you can follow Baille Ard's approach and go directly to the experts in your community. Try to find experienced local teachers who know the curriculum, know the trails and who know the community involved.

If you have some educators on board and are looking into creating some activities but not sure where to get started, St. FX has begun offering teachers an Outdoor Leadership Educational Leadership Diploma, Project Wild has excellent resources in both French and English and the Outdoor Council of Canada has programs for teachers as well.

How Baille Ard has partnered with after school programs

On top of all the work they've done to include classrooms on their trails, Baille Ard has created a unique partnership with an after school drama club at a neighbouring school.

What started out as a way for the club to enjoy nature, boost creativity and be active after a day in school has turned into something much larger. The drama club has started to put on plays right on the trails and have brought in students from across Sydney to watch them perform.

If there's a school nearby it might be worthwhile to see what afterschool programs they offer, you never know where that first conversation might lead to and who you might introduce to your trails.

Added benefits of activities and partnerships?

As Baille Ard continued to grow their network and created new activities they began to see three added benefits their association received from the partnerships they were forming:

As they began inviting groups onto their trails for a presentation or activity it encouraged them to develop an activity that they could use in the future. It forced them to really think about what's on the trail that's of interest as they come up with ideas for activities.

It's introduced them to a variety of experts and allowed them to form relationships with everyone from teachers to bird-watchers to local naturalists! It's enabled them to rethink the values of activities they've used in the past and how they can reuse them for different age-groups and partnerships as they look to introduce more people to their trails

Conclusion

When you really look closely, children are spending a big chunk of their time in school. Most school-aged youth spend close to six hours a day in classrooms and close to 30 hours per week.

So if you're looking for ways to engage youth on your trails, approaching nearby schools is a great place to start!

While the Baille Ard Recreation Association was lucky enough to have some educators on board, they've laid out a solid foundation for groups looking follow in their path:

Curriculum-based activities can be a great tool to get classrooms to come explore your trails. They provide a clear link between getting outside and education and make it easier on teachers to justify spending time outside

Seek out opportunities to involve afterschool programs with your trails. After school clubs are as popular as they've ever been. Taking the opportunity to encourage clubs to use your trails can foster great partnerships between your trails and volunteers in the school.

Use every activity and partnership as a chance to reflect! As you create new activities or partnerships always take a moment to think back on what made past instances so successful.