



Trust for  
Learning

# Nurturing All Children in Nature

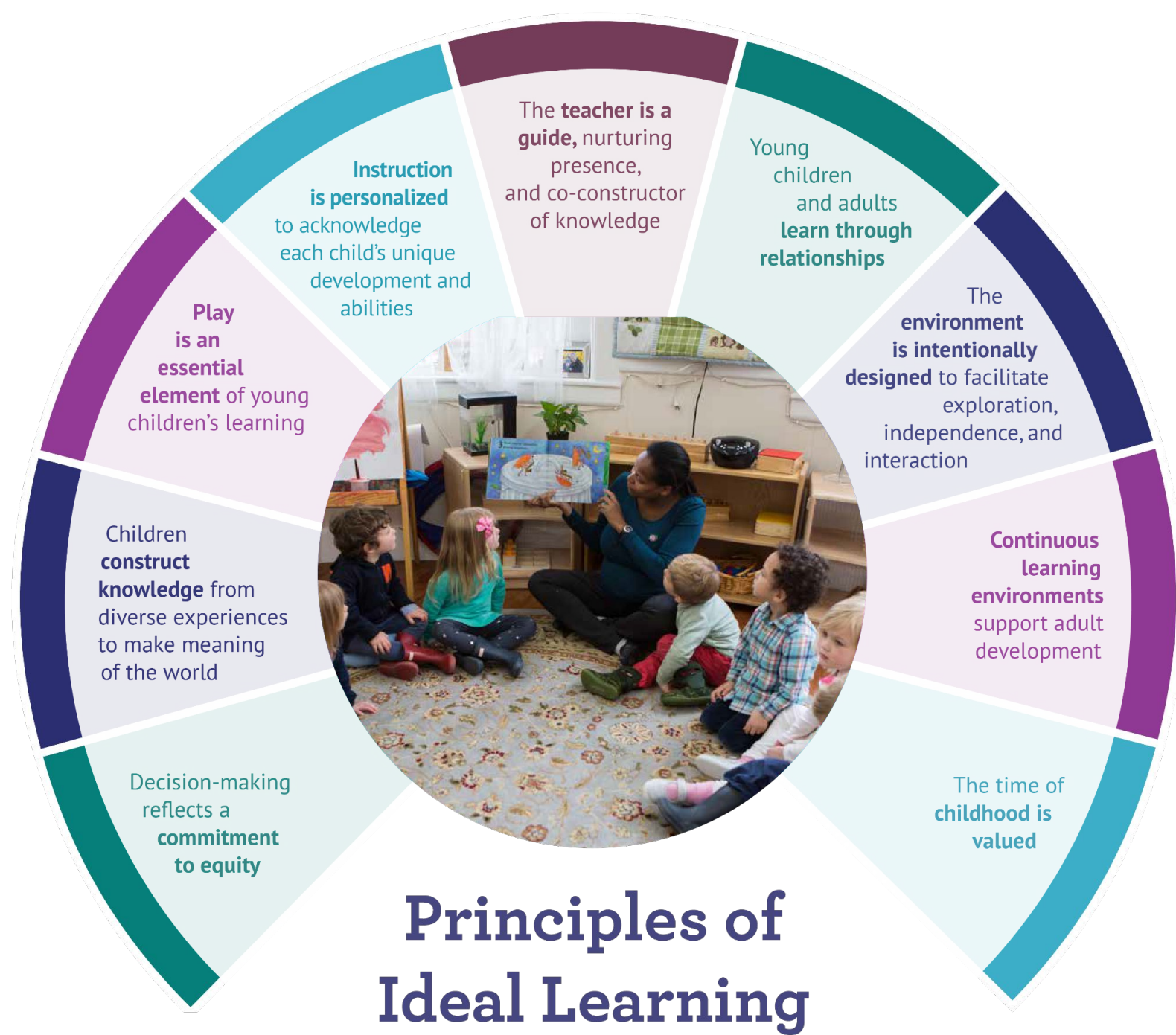
**NASLEE Roundtable - October 12, 2023**

# Goals

- Share evidence base regarding nature based learning
- Highlight trends
- Implementation strategies
- Case study: Washington State



Educators working from the principles of ideal learning recognize the importance and impact of the physical environment on young children's healthy development, sense of safety, well-being, and ability to learn. The environment is a powerful teacher. The ideal learning principles expand beyond classroom walls to include an essential experience of nature and the natural world around us in the young child's environment, care, and education.





# Conversation Grounding

Nature-based learning encompasses both outdoor education, and nature learning in indoor classroom settings and outdoor spaces.

**Nature preschools may be called nature-based preschools, place-based schools, outdoor preschools, nature kindergartens, forest kindergartens, or zoo and aquarium schools, among other terms.**

When nature is seen as an ideal learning environment, everyone benefits: children, educators, families, and communities. Time outdoors allows children to expand the boundaries of their knowledge, grow their problem-solving skills and emotional intelligence, develop the essential foundations for scientific thinking, and build a sense of self in connection to their world.

# Rooted in Research



## Physical health and development

- Activity in nature supports overall physical development with an increase in stamina: running, climbing, digging, playing, with the engagement of fine and gross motor movement, and skill development.
- Time in nature strengthens the immune system and reduces allergies.
- There is a positive relationship between outdoor activity and a reduction of obesity
- Nature activity invites a range of movement that supports brain development.



## Development of social and cooperative skills

- Nature exploration expands activity and supports the development of confidence, curiosity, independence, and empathy.
- There are many invitations for cooperative play, projects, and teamwork.
- Nature activity supports open-ended, self-directed, or group play that supports the development of social skills through interaction and collaboration.
- Time in nature supports emotional regulation and co-regulation.

# Rooted in Research



## Wellbeing, emotional health, and addressing trauma

- A positive correlation exists between experiences in nature and anxiety, stress, and depression relief.
- Time in nature supports a healthy nervous system.
- Nature cultivates emotional resilience.
- Experiencing nature has a protective function: offsetting the impact of an adverse childhood.
- Ecotherapy, or the practice of being in nature to promote health, has a positive impact on children in a post-covid environment.



## Academic learning

- The wide range of experiences helps prepare young children for academic success.
- Nature experience supports visual-motor and sensory integration, essential foundations for academic success.
- Nature elements provide multiple learning and discovery opportunities, strengthening skills and academic success.
- An open-ended environment supports the development of decision-making and executive functioning.

“

If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it. Perhaps this is what Thoreau had in mind when he said, “the more slowly trees grow at first, the sounder they are at the core, and I think the same is true of human beings.

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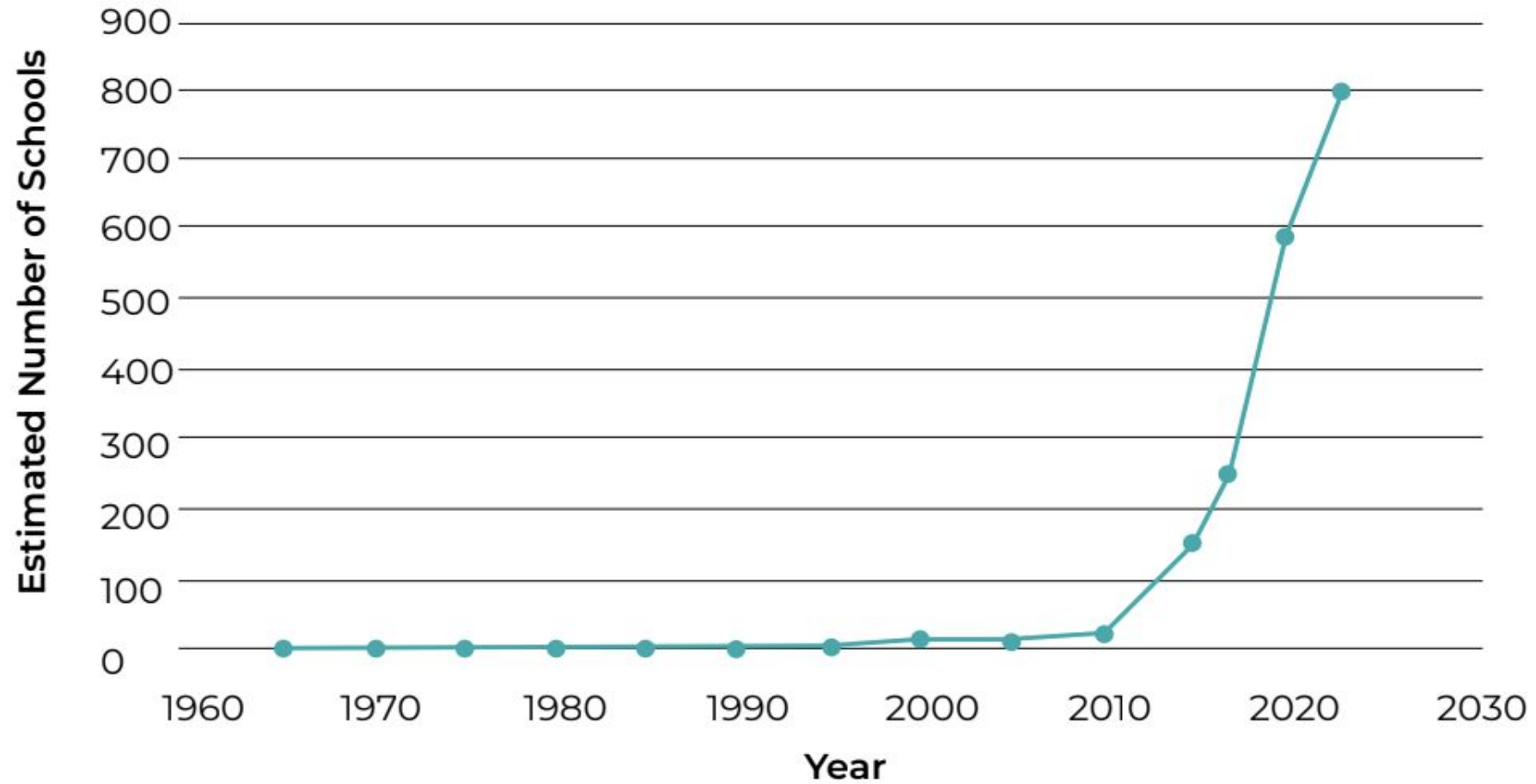
– David Sobel





# Fertile Soil

**Estimated Number of Nature Preschools  
in the United States, 1965-2022**



Source: Natural Start Alliance

## Highest Number of Nature Preschools by State



California



Washington



Minnesota

## Highest Number of Nature Preschools Per Capita



Vermont

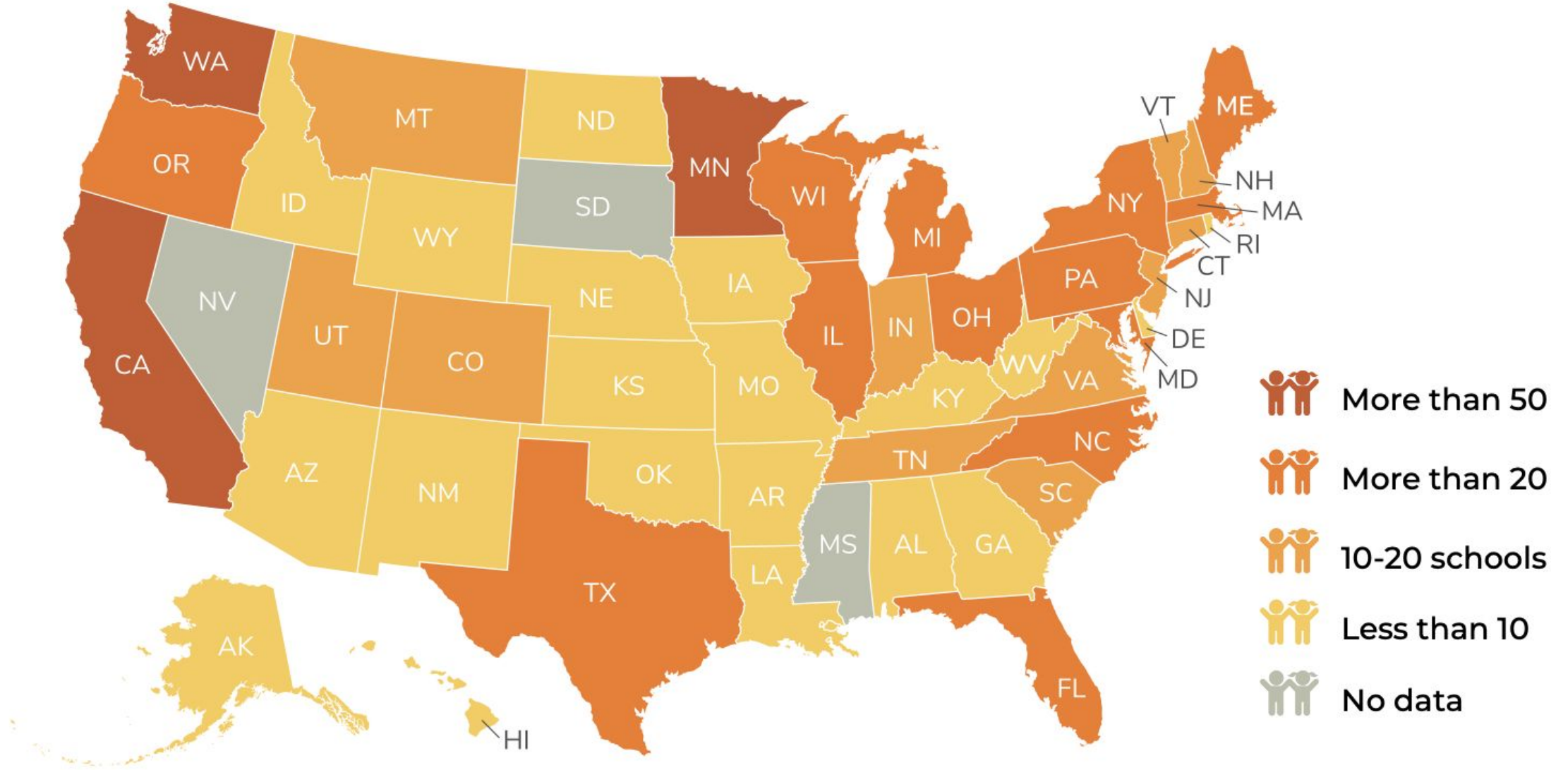


Maine



New Hampshire

# Distribution of Nature Preschools Across the United States



Source: Natural Start Alliance

# Uneven Ground: Inequities in Nature-Based Learning

- 78% of children served in nature preschools are White compared to 47% of the U.S. population
- On average across all nature preschool programs, staff are 80.4% White, 9.2% Latino, 3.2% Black, 2.4% Asian, and <1% American Indian.
- About 25% of programs operate with some form of public funding (for example, vouchers, subsidies, Head Start, or county assistance).



# Uneven Ground: Inequities in Nature-Based Learning

- 71% of staff hold a bachelor's degree or higher
- Median hourly wage (\$18) for nature preschool educators is 24% higher than other preschool teachers.
- 90% of the workforce is female compared to 97% of the entire preschool workforce



Nature-based learning experiences are achievable, high-impact, and can be affordable for any district or program. Equity of access to nature for students from all backgrounds should be a priority for educators.



Trust for  
Learning

## **Nurturing All Children in Nature**

Ideal Learning in the Natural World

MARCH 2023

# Planting Seeds

Showcases examples of  
nature-based programs in:

- Head Start
- school districts
- family-based childcare
- center-based preschool
- community partnerships



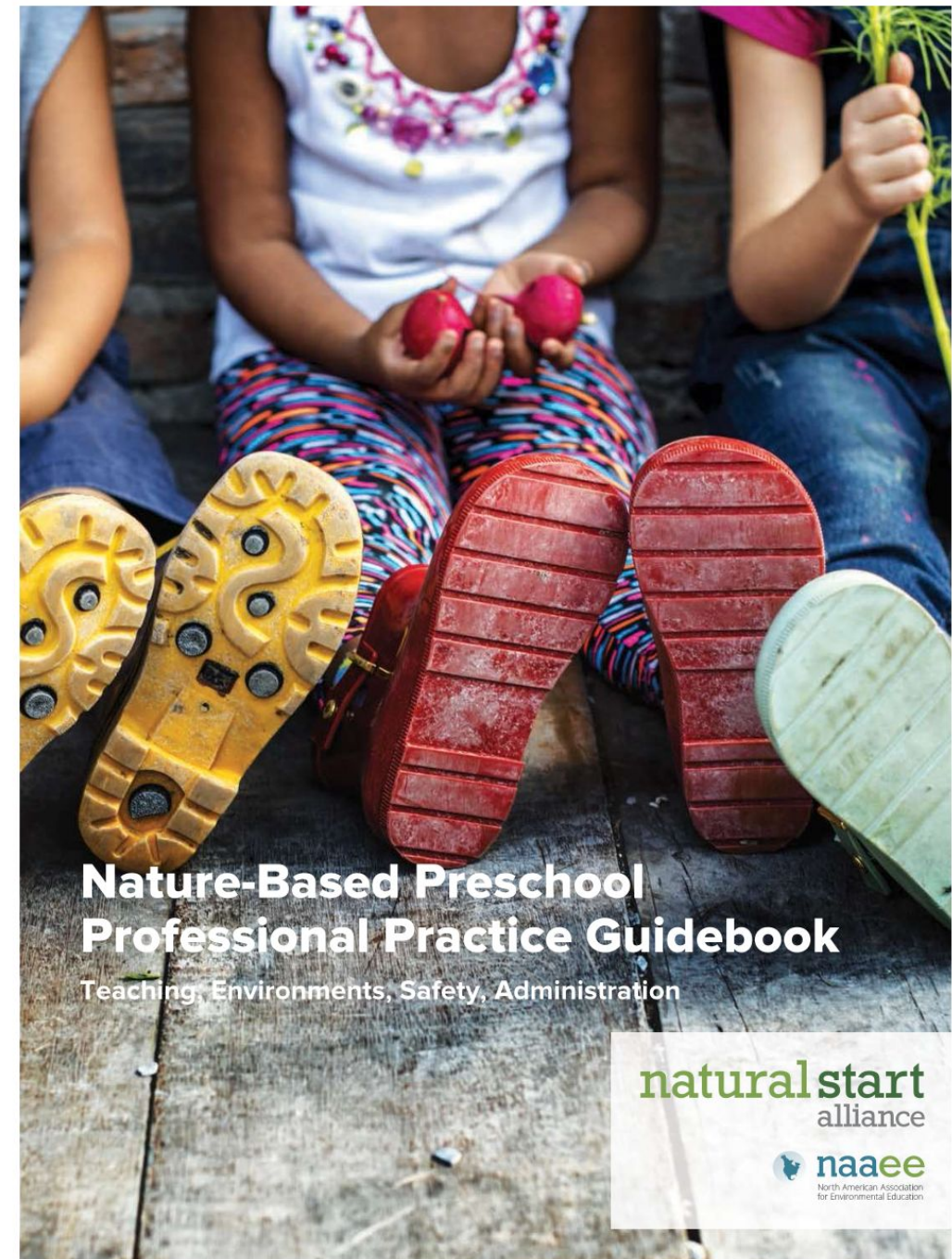
# Planting Seeds

- Educator preparation and development
- Centering the needs of children with disabilities
- Updating policies, regulations and licensing requirements



# Tilling the Soil: Educator Development

- emphasize outdoor learning approaches and research,
- how to connect children and nature with joy and safety,
- practical experiences that help build an understanding,
- ideas for curriculum and activities,
- appropriate clothing and equipment



# Tilling the Soil: Children with Disabilities

Without careful planning, children with disabilities may encounter disruption or restriction in their participation in nature activities. Physical access should be considered and accommodated in the design or redesign of outdoor spaces. Note: partnering with public spaces and facilities that are already ADA compliant can help.

Outdoors also lends itself to opportunities for children with sensory issues. Thought should be given to creating varied experiences for children with diverse learning needs.



# Tilling the Soil: State Strategies

- Revise QRIS systems to add emphasis on outdoor learning environments (Texas, North Carolina)
- Incorporate nature-based learning into early learning standards
- Provide teacher training and technical assistance (South Carolina)
- Create Nature Preschool Pilot Programs (Washington, Oregon, Maryland)



# Tilling the Soil: Licensing

- America's child care licensing system was built for the indoors, so nature programs don't always fit. A sizable minority (42%) are not licensed.
- Some programs may not be eligible for licensing in their state if they operate entirely or primarily outdoors and don't maintain indoor spaces that meet licensing standards.
- These programs often operate for fewer hours or with fewer children than required for licensing, or are otherwise exempt from licensing.
- Since licensing is a basic requirement for public funding of programs, the absence of public funding represents a significant barrier to equitable access.

Pursuing licensure for outdoor preschools is an upstream, systems-level approach that makes outdoor preschools more accessible to more families. Changing laws to offer a clear pathway to licensure for outdoor preschools is the clearest way to make the biggest impact for these programs across a state.

# Case Study: Washington State

Prior to 2017:

- License-exempt programs under 4 hours per day
- 40+ outdoor preschools
- Unable to accept state subsidy = inequitable access
- Washington Nature Preschool Association established
- Advocacy and partnership passed Outdoor Preschool Pilot bill.

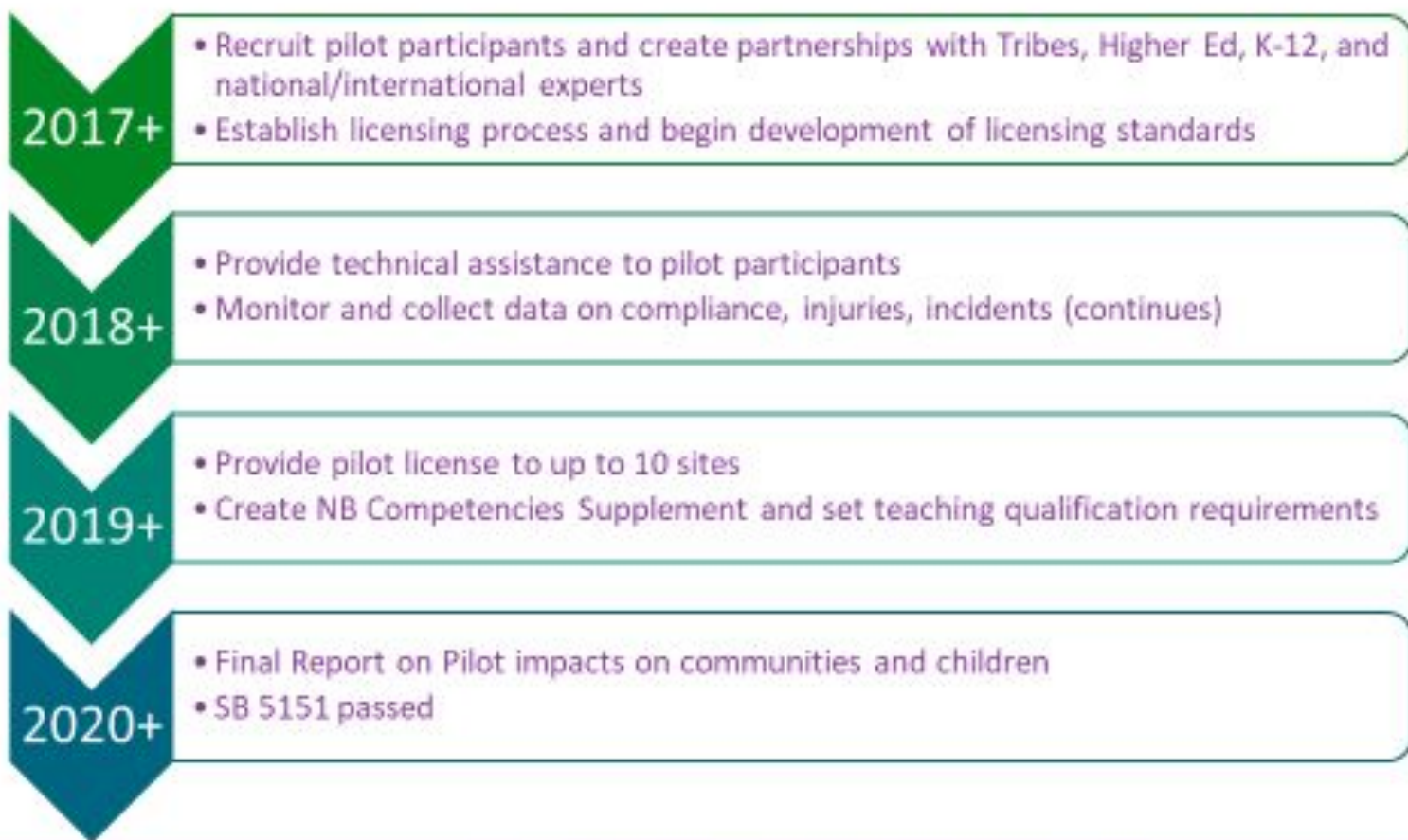


OUTDOOR PRESCHOOL PILOT  
FINAL LEGISLATIVE REPORT



Washington State Department of  
CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES

# Outdoor Preschool Pilot (2017 – 2021)



# Rules Alignment

- Additions for learning/play in the outdoor learning environment
  - Benefit risk Assessment
  - Campfires
  - Water safety
  - Foraging
  - Tools
  - Climbing natural features
  - Staff ratios
- Staff qualifications
- Adding school-age and mixed-age standards





# Successful Program Models

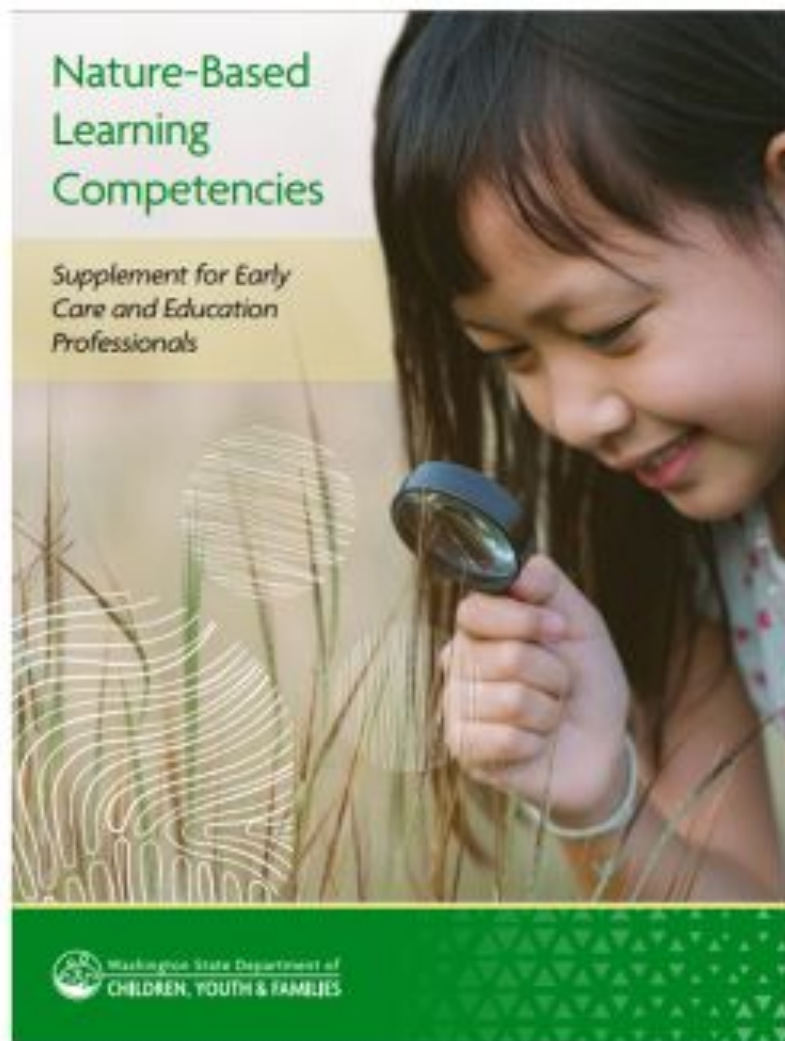
Outdoor – set location

Outdoor – backpack

Hybrid

Farm-Based





## Professional Development Supports

- Co-design to develop Nature-Based Learning Competencies
- Goals include ecological development of children



## Professional Development - Training

- Initial Training – Outdoor Nature-Based Child Care Basics
- Foundational Training – ONB 10-hour training



# Professional Development - Education



- Early childhood /school-age education partnered with nature-based credits
  - 1:1 Consultation
- Equivalents developed based on ONB related content
- WA State ECE Short Certificate
  - ONB Specialization





**Questions?**

Every child deserves access to high-quality early education that promotes healthy development. Every child should feel connected to the world around them and should feel confident in their ability to care for nature. Every child should be able to enjoy the myriad benefits of play and learning outside. Let's reflect on how we can change our systems to bring the benefits of nature-based learning into every program, for every child.



**Thank you!**