

August 14th, 2022

To all Forest School Families,

Over the past decade, Tír na nÓg Forest School has inspired outdoor educational opportunities for children, educators, and adults throughout Canada and around the globe. As Atlantic Canada's First Forest School, our mission was to create emergent programs focused on outdoor learning in healthy environments designed to raise the whole child. During the last ten years, we have made considerable strides in our goal of creating a Center of Excellence in outdoor education, health, and well-being and are proud of the programs we have delivered to hundreds of children in our community.

It is with heavy hearts that we embark on a new chapter for Tír na nÓg Forest School. **As of September 2022, all our educational programs, including preschool, elementary and middle school will no longer be offered. Please be reassured that all deposits will be refunded in full. For our preschool program, we recognize that it may take time for some families to find alternate care, and we will be operating a reduced program during the month of September to help with that transition. A separate email will be provided to our preschool group with more information.**

We recognize this may come as a shock to you. As such, we have included information below to help you better understand the considerations in our analysis of the long-term feasibility of operating our programs.

Earlier this year, the NB Department of Education introduced the Canada - New Brunswick Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, which aims to make child care affordable for all families. As an organization, we also believe in affordable and inclusive child care and, have offered scholarships in excess of \$200,000 to families who would not otherwise be able to attend our school over the last decade.

While we consider many of the objectives of this action plan a positive step for families across this province, unfortunately, it has implications for our operation. As the province transitions Early Childhood Education to publicly managed but privately delivered programs with a mandate to limit profits for operators, it is not feasible to move forward under this model. Our existing structure and unique, one-of-a-kind programming does not fit within the Provincial Early Learning and Child Care Designation Program. Our goal and focus has always been on low child-to-educator ratios (5:1) to support children's health, wellness, and development in safe outdoor play and education. Below are some of the highlights from the New Brunswick Action Plan (2021-2023) that were instrumental in our decision-making process:

- **"Over the last four (4) years, New Brunswick has moved toward a more publicly managed and privately delivered early learning and child care system through the New Brunswick Early Learning facility Designation Program and the Child Care Registry."** *(Reference – Management of the Early Learning and Child Care System in New Brunswick 2022)*
- **"New Brunswick has successfully increased its public management of early learning and child care with policy levers to limit profit making and increase quality learning investment."** *(Reference – Summary of the Designation of New Brunswick Early Learning Centers and Homes 2022)*

- **“The provincial goal is having all eligible centers and homes designated by December 2022.”**
(Reference – *Summary of the Designation of New Brunswick Early Learning Centers and Homes 2022*)

Within the new plan, our financial sustainability under the Designation funding model would require us to transition to an approximate 10:1 child to educator ratio. This is one of the key contributors in our decision. Our programs were built to ensure that each child has appropriate attention and development within a safe environment for outdoor learning. As a result, we have chosen not to jeopardize the very foundation we built our school upon and have chosen not to operate under the Designation program due to our commitment on health, wellness, safety, and the sustainability of our operations in an outdoor classroom. We will not waver in our ratios for providing a safe environment in outdoor education without boundaries and will not place perimeters for financial sustainability before the well-being of our programs.

With this information in hand, and the province’s goal of having all centers become Designated by the end of the year fast approaching, we recognized that significant tuition increases would be required to remain sustainable while continuing to operate within the Forest School model we spent the last decade building.

The stability of our infrastructure in both the preschool and elementary programming is dependent upon each other. With our Early Childhood Education program representing a significant percentage of our school, the decision to end all programs was the right choice.

In anticipation of the impact that the new Federal and Provincial Child Care agreement would have, we met with the Deputy Minister and members of the Senior Management team at the Department of Education and proposed exploring a partnership that would help to bring outdoor education concepts to other early learning centers, public schools and post-secondary education institutions across New Brunswick, unfortunately this opportunity was not given the consideration or priority that we hoped it would. In summary, we worked tirelessly this year and have exhausted every avenue in an attempt to develop a long term plan for affordable, inclusive and sustainable programs.

As we turn the page and begin a new chapter, we have been reflecting on some of our accomplishments over the last decade and wanted to share a few of those highlights below with you in closing.

Recognized as a Champion in Outdoor Education in the following media and publications:

- Second Regard CBC National Documentary
- Saltscapes Magazine
- MacLean’s Magazine
- Chickadee Magazine
- NB Plays Outside
- Many other featured films and stories

Developed guidelines and practices for provincial approval and use in outdoor education. These practices are used in educational facilities across the province today:

- Safe play and learning without physical boundaries (fences) for outdoor classrooms

- Low child-to-educator ratios (5:1) focused on primary development and safe play
- Rest and peaceful time in hammocks bringing sleep time outside in the fresh air
- Safe fire environments and tool use starting in the early years of education
- Creating the Outdoor Basecamp Classroom

Additional Initiatives:

- Supported students from various economic backgrounds through our self-funded scholarship program.
- Supported children in our community with free summer camps.
- Sponsorships and in-kind donations towards the establishment of Outdoor Classroom Projects throughout NB.
- Continuous lobbying to government officials for more resources, training, and awareness in Outdoor Education.
- Created a Forest School certification program for educators.
- Invited to speak as an advocate on health, wellness, and outdoor education at various conferences throughout Atlantic Canada.
- Continue to be a champion for outdoor education through our Outdoor Classroom Project that launched this year with the donation of \$25,000 to build an outdoor classroom at Millidgeville North School.

Our future energies will be redirected to Forest School UniversiTree, where we have developed a compilation of resources and training programs to help inspire educators and eliminate barriers to getting children outside.

I would like to extend my gratitude to all of our Forest Families for your support of Forest School! Our commitment remains strong to bringing awareness to the benefits of getting outside, and we hope you continue to enjoy all of the benefits of nature with your family for years to come.

Tim