

ANNUAL PROGRESS REPORT

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# Project Green Classrooms

# 2023

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# BACKGROUND

The statewide Project Green Classrooms (PGC) initiative was established in June 2017 [Executive Order 01.01.2017.12](#). The executive order charges the initiative with reporting to the Governor annually on the status of the Initiative’s work and outlining the prior year’s progress. Staff support for writing the annual progress report is provided by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

## HISTORY

Executive Order 01.01.2017.12 establishes a public-private stakeholder group called the Project Green Classrooms Initiative consisting of state agencies and other partners to promote outdoor activities and environmental education through schools, in communities, and on public lands to benefit Maryland’s young people.

PGC interprets the term “green classrooms” in its broadest sense to mean all opportunities to learn, discover, and experience the environment and natural resources in Maryland. This includes both indoor and outdoor opportunities; experiences during the normal school day, at home, and in the community. PGC recognizes the unique and critical role that meaningful outdoor experiences play in developing the next generation of environmental stewards.

The collective work of PGC aligns with many of the goals of the Moore administration including setting students up for success, preparing students for future jobs, bolstering the wellbeing of Marylanders, and making Maryland the greenest state in the country. By working together, PGC can contribute to healthier spaces, provide opportunities for Marylanders to access and connect with nature, and encourage a stewardship ethic in Maryland's young people.

## RESPONSIBILITIES

The Executive Order outlines responsibilities of the PGC initiative, including:

- **Develop recommendations** to help shape State policy and stakeholder practices to address barriers, needs, and opportunities identified by the Initiative;
- **Broaden the engagement of stakeholders** in the Initiative's work, and help establish the tools and resources necessary to advance the work of the group;
- **Advise and support state leadership** in the implementation and tracking of relevant Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement goals and outcomes as they relate to environmental education.

## FOCUS AREAS

As an advisory body, PGC has carried out its responsibilities in three main focus areas including:

Focus Area 01	Supporting environmental literacy programs in schools
Focus Area 02	Increasing access to nearby nature
Focus Area 03	Promoting the use of the outdoors for healthy learning, discovery, play, and career exploration

The following report outlines the progress of PGC in those three focus areas. Each of the State agencies and non-governmental partners that participate in PGC works individually to ensure that Maryland's youth experience, understand, and learn to conserve the natural environment. This report aims to describe the collective work of the PGC initiative.

Focus Area 01

**Supporting environmental literacy programs in schools**

PGC is uniquely situated to support environmental literacy programs in schools by connecting Maryland local education agencies (LEA) to regional environmental literacy efforts, exploring emerging priorities in environmental literacy, aligning with Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) initiatives, engaging high-level leadership in environmental literacy efforts in Maryland, and strategically increasing capacity for environmental literacy in Maryland.



*Students release fish at Patapsco Valley State Park.*



## 1a. Connected Maryland Local Education Agencies to Regional Environmental Literacy Efforts

PGC steering committee members coordinated the participation of Maryland local education agencies (LEA) in the Environmental Literacy Forum hosted by the NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office on behalf of the Chesapeake Bay Program Education Workgroup. The Forum provided support to school district personnel and their partners to develop systemic, equitable, and sustainable environmental literacy programs and plans. The Forum emphasized Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences (MWEEs), sustainable school efforts, and education for climate action as key elements for school districts to include in their strategies. Educators participated in the Forum to better understand, advocate for, and deliver programs that contribute to the Environmental Literacy outcomes of the 2014 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement.

LEA representatives from across the Chesapeake Bay Watershed were invited to participate. LEAs from Maryland included Prince George's County, Baltimore City, Washington County, Queen Anne's County, and Frederick County.



*MD LEA representatives discuss elements of a successful ELP.*

Maryland Forum participants identified key elements that they felt were important to promote the development and implementation of [Environmental Literacy Plans](#). Some of those key elements included:

- Linking environmental literacy to school system goals
- Emphasizing the multidisciplinary nature of environmental literacy
- Partnering with school facilities staff
- Engaging leadership in advancing environmental literacy within the LEA and State



*4th grade students commit to take stewardship actions in their community.*

## **1b. Explored Emerging Priorities - Climate Change Education and High Impact Actions for Sustainable Schools**

Throughout 2023, the Steering Committee began to explore PGC's role in supporting schools and school districts in taking significant actions to mitigate impact and adapt to the realities of a changing climate. This includes infusing education for climate action into our existing, robust environmental literacy portfolio.

To support this work, staff from the Maryland Energy Administration and Anne Arundel County Public Schools met with the Steering Committee in April regarding current initiatives that minimize the environmental impact of school buildings and school grounds. PGC is interested in promoting opportunities for school district adoption of these high-impact actions.

One important first step is for PGC to re-engage with the Interagency Commission on School Construction (IAC) to capitalize on the period of unprecedented school construction and renovation that has resulted from recent increases in federal funding. This opportunity is time-sensitive since many of these funding programs are time-limited, including the American Rescue Plan (2021), the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act/ Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (2022), and the Inflation Reduction Act (2023).

PGC recognizes that climate change is a complex issue that can not be sufficiently addressed by any single organization or entity. Therefore, PGC has partnered with the Mid-Atlantic Climate Change Education (MACCE) Collaborative to support the development of a learning network to share resources, best practices, and educational materials around climate change education and continues to work with the Chesapeake Bay Program Education Workgroup to advance education for climate action.



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Every Maryland child shall have the opportunity to splash and swim in the water.

-Maryland Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights



## 1c. Emerged High-Level Leadership in Environmental Literacy Efforts in Maryland

PGCs emphasis on climate change education and the opportunity for school buildings and grounds to lessen their environmental impact influenced the larger regional conversation at the 2023 Environmental Literacy Summit. In November, Maryland co-hosted the 2023 Environmental Literacy Summit in collaboration with the NOAA Chesapeake Bay Office on behalf of the Chesapeake Bay Program's Education Workgroup. The Environmental Literacy Summit is a biennial convening of high-level leadership from Natural Resource agencies and state Departments of Education to review progress towards achieving the Environmental Literacy Goal of the 2014 Watershed Agreement. The 2023 Summit was especially significant as partners within the Chesapeake Bay Program are considering how the Agreement will evolve beyond 2025.



*DNR Secretary Joshua Kurtz addresses leaders attending the Environmental Literacy Summit.*

The Summit provided an important forum for dialogue, collaboration, and coordination between federal, state, and non-governmental leaders about the future of equitable, accessible, and impactful environmental education in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Leadership in attendance explored how school districts can help prepare their students and schools for a changing climate by focusing on two themes:

- **Building Green Career Pathways:** By identifying and evaluating innovative programs that are developing climate-ready career pathways to support emerging workforce needs related to sustainability.
- **High Impact Actions for Sustainable Schools:** By defining and exploring significant actions schools and school districts can take to mitigate impact and adapt to the realities of the changing climate.

Overall takeaways from Maryland Environmental Literacy Summit participants included a focus to:

- Promote the adoption of sustainable school best practices by LEAs
- Leverage environmental literacy to support workforce development in green careers especially as it relates to the College and Career Readiness Pillar of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future
- Increase coordination between Project Green Classrooms and the Interagency Commission on School Construction



Every Maryland child shall have the opportunity to watch wildlife.

-Maryland Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights

## **Id. Aligned with Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) Initiatives**

The work of PGC to “support environmental literacy programs in schools” is meant to, in part, support the implementation of the [Code of Maryland Regulations \(COMAR\) 13A.04.17.01, Requirements for Environmental Literacy Instructional Programs for Grades Pre Kindergarten - 12](#). This COMAR Requirement states that each local school education agency “shall provide in public schools a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary environmental literacy program infused within current curricular offerings and aligned with the Maryland Environmental Literacy Standards.”

In March 2023, MSDE released the [Environmental Literacy Standards Framework](#). State frameworks are supporting documents that provide guidance for implementing the State Standards. The Environmental Literacy Standards Framework provides consistency in learning expectations for students in environmental literacy programs across the 24 local education agencies as local curriculum is developed and adopted using these documents as a foundation. Representatives from the PGC steering committee attended the 2023 MSDE Environmental Literacy Collaborative meeting where the Environmental Literacy Standards Framework was introduced to LEA staff in order to better understand the priorities of formal educators working to advance environmental literacy.

The steering committee invited staff from the [Accountability and Implementation Board \(AIB\)](#) to give an overview of the [Blueprint for Maryland's Future](#) in an effort to understand where environmental literacy efforts can align. PGC looks forward to working with MSDE to advance these important initiatives in Maryland. The Blueprint for Maryland's Future was passed by the Maryland General Assembly in 2021 to transform public education in the state into a world-class education system. Under the Blueprint, education funding will increase by \$3.8 billion each year over the next 10 years in order to enrich student experiences and accelerate student outcomes, as well as improve the quality of education for all children in Maryland, especially those who have been historically underserved.





Every Maryland child shall have the opportunity to discover and connect with their natural world.

-Maryland Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights

## **1e. Strategically Increased Capacity for Environmental Literacy in Maryland**

While PGC works to support environmental literacy programs in schools, there are still significant barriers to ensure every student graduates environmentally literate. Therefore, PGC supports strategic efforts aimed to increase state-wide capacity to implement environmental literacy programming through strengthening local networks and increasing pre-service teacher preparedness.

The Maryland Environmental Literacy Advisory Network (MELAN) is a network of education professionals with diverse perspectives dedicated to ensuring all students in Maryland are environmentally literate upon graduation. MELAN works to build Maryland's capacity for environmental literacy, in part, by establishing two-way communication pathways between local environmental education networks and state-wide initiatives like PGC. This work involves supporting local networks through the convening of regional meetings between educators, environmental education providers, and other key community groups. MELAN is supported by NOAA Bay Watershed Education and Training (B-WET) funding.

MELAN aims to: advocate for equitable funding to support environmental literacy by connecting with state and local leaders, identify and address barriers related to the integration of the Environmental Literacy Standards and climate change curriculum, and ensure access to training for preservice, in-service, and non-formal educators. In 2023, MELAN onboarded a Network Coordinator to support leveraging the expertise, partnerships, and influence of MELAN membership to effect change and accelerate progress. The MELAN Coordinator sits on the PGC Steering Committee to ensure efforts between the two groups are complementary.

In 2023, PGC steering committee members supported the inaugural year of the pre-service Higher Education Environmental Literacy (HEEL) Faculty Development Fellowship. The HEEL fellowship is hosted by the Maryland Association of Environmental and Outdoor Education (MAEOE) through a grant from the Chesapeake Bay Trust (CBT). The goal of the HEEL Fellowship is to advance environmental literacy teacher preparation initiatives so that future Maryland teachers know how to integrate environmental literacy across grade bands and subject areas. The fellowship engages higher education faculty through in-person professional development sessions and asynchronous environmental literacy modules to learn how to integrate environmental literacy into pre-service teacher learning. Participants were provided a stipend. The first cohort was hosted August 2023-January 2024, a second cohort is being considered for 2024-2025 and is dependent on funding.





*Students look for macroinvertebrates.*

Focus  
Area

02

**Increasing access to  
nearby nature**

In order to connect more children and communities to Maryland's natural resources, it is critical to increase the quantity, quality, and accessibility of green spaces available for exploration, recreation, and learning. Project Green Classrooms is committed to increasing access to parks and the outdoors with a focus on communities that have historically lacked access to nature.

## **2a. Great Maryland Outdoors Act and Greenspace Equity Act**

In 2023, two key legislative bills were passed that will support both equitable access to nature and the ability for state parks to provide high-quality and enriching experiences for Maryland's students and families. The Great Maryland Outdoors Act, will enable the expansion of accessible, inclusive parks, while also providing resources to strengthen the pipeline of job opportunities for park staff, rangers, foresters, and more. PGC is committed to working with partners to provide opportunities for access to nature. The Greenspace Equity Act will support efforts to enhance the public health and livability of overburdened and underserved communities by implementing projects to preserve, create, and enhance community greenspace. These two pieces of legislation will influence the work of PGC in 2024 and beyond.



Every Maryland child shall have the opportunity to play and learn outdoors.  
-Maryland Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights

## 2b. Supported Schoolyard Forest Initiative

In 2023, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) announced the establishment of the Maryland Schoolyard Forests Program as part of [Maryland's Five Million Trees Initiative](#) and in partnership with Project Green Classrooms. Through this initiative, the State of Maryland will develop partnerships with students, schools, and municipalities to leverage the critical role of schoolyards as community centers to promote increased tree canopy cover, create pathways for the discovery of nature, and support local climate resiliency priorities. The Schoolyard Forests program will also augment the goals of the Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement, the Maryland Greenhouse Gas Reduction Act (GGRA), and other climate goals while supplementing environmental literacy standards for Maryland's young and future leaders. Partners will include DNR, MAEOE, Casey Trees, Green Schoolyards America and more.



PGC aims to provide a clearer picture of what a 21st century climate-ready workforce looks like and support a robust pipeline for Marylanders to successfully pursue those careers. By continuing to connect the various youth career development programs as a singular community, PGC facilitates intentional strategies that strengthen green career pathways.



*Somerset county students learn about waterfowl.*

### **3a. Strengthened green career pathways.**

The Maryland Conservation Careers Guide is available online and was promoted by PGC steering committee members at career events throughout the year. The guide was a collaborative effort by PGC partners, resource professionals, youth, and communications staff and took almost five years to complete. The guide was designed to present conservation careers that are not limited to life science and geosciences but rather a wide range of disciplines that support action to protect, preserve, restore, and conserve our natural resources. Continued promotion of the Conservation Careers Guide is an ongoing priority of PGC.

PGC is committed to mobilizing resources so that Maryland's youth have the opportunity to enter green careers. This priority was adopted as one of two themes of the bay wide Environmental Literacy Leadership Summit, hosted by Maryland. During the Summit, leaders about career and workforce development programs that support the transition to a carbon-neutral future and developed a shared understanding of how decisions are made within States to support workforce development. Specific next steps from the Summit will be finalized at future meetings of the PGC steering committee and Chesapeake Bay Program Education Workgroup. This work will be informed by the findings of the Chesapeake Bay Program's Workforce Landscape Assessment.

# LOOKING FORWARD

As a well-rounded public-private group, PGC is uniquely positioned to mobilize resources so that all of Maryland's youth can experience, understand, and learn to conserve the natural environment. Connecting Maryland's youth to the natural world is vital to fostering stewardship of our state's natural resources. In 2024, PGC plans to reconvene the PGC Leadership Team, participate in strategic planning around the Chesapeake Bay Program's Environmental Literacy Goal, support connections between environmental education, climate change education, workforce development and diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ), and more. As PGC embarks on these initiatives, our commitment remains unwavering, driven by the need to cultivate an environmentally literate generation that is equipped to address the challenges of a sustainable future.



Every Maryland child shall have the opportunity to catch a fish  
-Maryland Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights

The mission of the [Project Green Classrooms] Initiative is to mobilize resources to ensure that Maryland’s youth experience, understand and learn to conserve the natural environment.

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*Staff support for writing the annual progress report is provided by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR).*



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