

SUMMARY

An Environmental Scan of Outdoor and Land-Based Early Learning in Canada

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This summary provides an overview of "An Environmental Scan of Outdoor and Land-Based Early Learning in Canada." The full scan, published in July 2026, can be found here: lawson.ca/OLBEnvScan.

About the Environmental Scan

An Environmental Scan of Outdoor and Land-Based Early Learning in Canada was commissioned to provide a comprehensive, evidence-informed picture of the research, policy, and professional landscape for outdoor and land-based early learning across Canada. It is intended to support leaders and policymakers in the development of a coherent jurisdictional policy framework to fully enable and promote outdoor and land-based early childhood education, especially in early learning and child care (ELCC) settings.

The scan examines how outdoor and land-based early learning is positioned, supported, or constrained across all 13 provinces and territories in Canada.

The scan is intended as a practical instrument for change, not simply a record of what exists. It moves deliberately from evidence (what the research shows) to analysis (how this is showing up across Canadian systems) to action (what needs to happen, and who is responsible). This summary follows the same logic.

Intended Audience

The scan is written for multiple audiences who each have a distinct role in realizing the vision of accessible, high-quality outdoor and land-based early learning for every child in Canada:

- Provincial and territorial governments
- Federal partners
- Indigenous governments, communities, and organizations
- Post-secondary institutions
- Professional bodies and standards organizations
- Sector advocates, researchers, and funders

Methods

The scan draws on four interlocking areas of inquiry:

- A national literature review synthesizing peer-reviewed research, policy documents, and Indigenous scholarship published primarily from 2019–2026.
- A jurisdictional analysis of ELCC licensing regulations across all 13 provinces and territories.
- A review of early learning frameworks across all 13 jurisdictions.
- An examination of standards of practice for early childhood educators, including national comparisons with Australia, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, and Germany.

Findings

The scan highlights research that high-quality outdoor and land-based early learning supports children's physical health and motor development, social-emotional competence, ecological awareness, cultural identity, creativity, and resilience. The scan also examines how outdoor and land-based early learning is positioned, supported, or constrained, domain by domain.

Early learning frameworks. Analysis of early learning frameworks across all 13 Canadian provinces and territories reveals a consistent and striking pattern: every jurisdiction acknowledges outdoor pedagogy in its early learning framework, yet no jurisdiction has updated its licensing regulations to match. This gap exists from coast to coast to coast.

Standards of practice. Standards of Practice for early childhood educators are limited across Canada. Those that exist do not acknowledge outdoor and land-based pedagogy. Across Canada, ECE professional standards show a systemic gap in both outdoor/land-based and Indigenous content, with no jurisdiction fully addressing either area.

Post-secondary preparation. Approximately 7% of post-secondary ECE programs across all provinces and territories include any outdoor or nature-based module. ECE curricula tend to treat outdoor and Indigenous content as elective enrichment rather than core professional knowledge.

Licensing regulations. All 13 provinces and territories state outdoor play as a requirement, typically specifying minimum daily time and minimum outdoor space allocations. However, regulations uniformly treat outdoor experiences as a compliance requirement rather than as a distinct pedagogical approach requiring intentional facilitation. The result is a regulatory environment that can accommodate outdoor time without meaningfully supporting outdoor learning.

The findings reveal that provincial and territorial early learning frameworks embrace outdoor and land-based teaching and learning, which is valued by Indigenous communities and early childhood educators across the country. Yet outdoor and land-based early learning remains constrained by ELCC regulatory systems not designed for it and by the near absence of related professional standards and competencies. **Across the country, outdoor and land-based pedagogy is simultaneously encouraged in principle and unsupported in practice.**

Key regulatory tensions

Five fundamental tensions emerge from the cross-jurisdictional regulatory analysis:

1. Compliance vs. Pedagogy: Current regulations frame outdoor play as a checkbox (daily time requirements, space allocations) rather than as a pedagogical approach with intentionality and learning outcomes.

2. Risk Elimination vs. Risk

Management: Regulations emphasize safety through restrictions such as fencing, approved surfaces, and line-of-sight supervision, while providing no guidance on supporting children's risky play.

3. Universal Standards vs. Cultural Self-

Determination: Standardized regulations impose Western assumptions about childhood and appropriate environments, constraining Indigenous communities' ability to develop land-based programs grounded in their own epistemologies and governance structures.

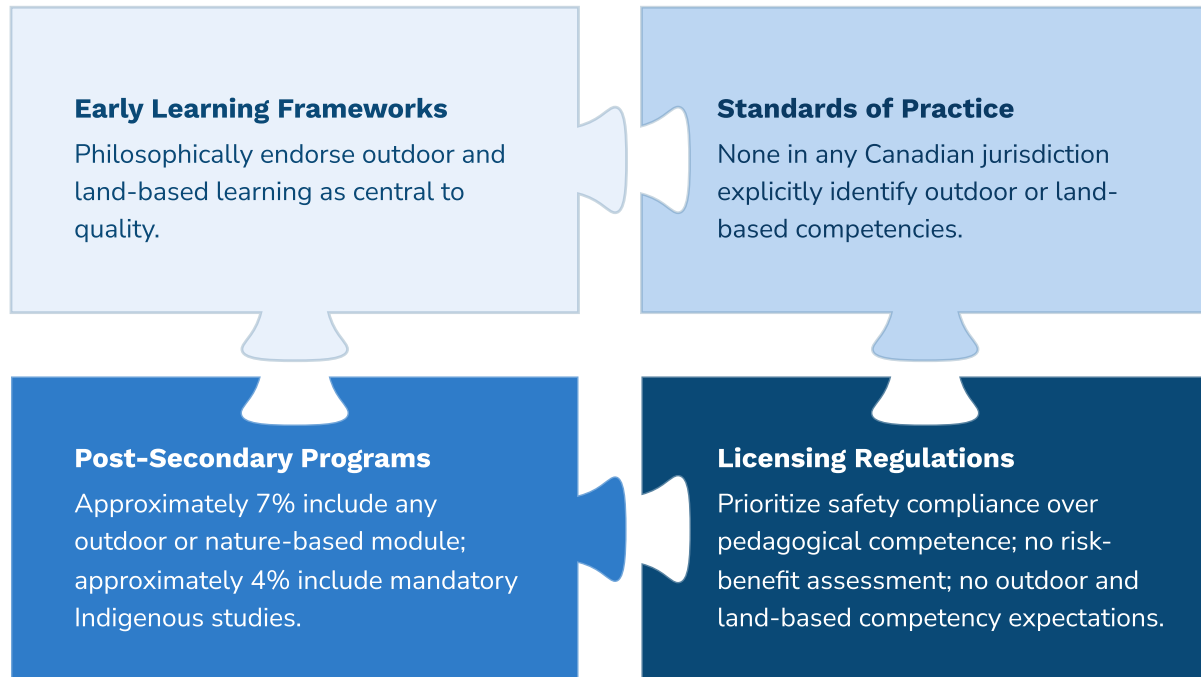
4. Indoor-Centric Models vs. Outdoor and Land-Based Program Viability:

Licensing requirements designed for facility-based early learning and child care create barriers for programs operating primarily outdoors. Outdoor and land-based programs (OLBs) operate primarily outdoors and on the land for most of the scheduled day across all seasons and weather conditions, and require a distinct regulatory framework.

5. Equity Intentions vs. Access Barriers: While early learning and child care systems aim for universal access, licensing incompatibility prevents OLBs from accessing public funding, limiting participation to higher-income families who can afford private-pay services.

The Critical Four-Way Disconnect

The scan identifies a critical four-way disconnect at the core of Canada's early learning systems that persists across all 13 provincial and territorial jurisdictions:



This four-way disconnect has serious consequences for children's access to quality outdoor learning, for educator professional identity, and for Canada's obligations under the TRC Calls to Action, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and UNDRIP.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Six cross-cutting themes bring the four-way disconnect to life through concrete evidence drawn from provincial/territorial regulations, early learning frameworks, and standards of practice. Each one represents both a current gap and a clear opportunity for action. Together, they set the stage for the recommendations that follow.

- 1. The Framework-Regulation Gap:** Provincial and territorial early learning frameworks are consistently more progressive than licensing regulations. This gap is widest in the territories, where frameworks are explicitly land-based but regulations apply standard southern compliance models.
- 2. Indigenous Land-Based Pedagogy:** Indigenous land-based pedagogy is absent from regulations and standards of practice across the country, despite Canada's TRC Calls to Action and UNDRIP commitments — a gap that is most acute in the territories where Indigenous peoples are the majority.

- 3. Ecological Literacy:** Ecological literacy is absent as a defined educator competency across all 13 jurisdictions. This is a striking gap given Canada's extraordinary ecological diversity and its commitment, through *Canada's Toward a National Framework for Environmental Learning (2025)*, to building the ecological knowledge and agency that climate action requires.
- 4. Risk-Benefit Assessment:** No jurisdiction has embedded risk-benefit assessment frameworks in licensing requirements, potentially creating regulatory environments that actively undermine high-quality outdoor programming.
- 5. Children's Rights:** Children's rights under UNCRC and UNDRIP are acknowledged in many frameworks but are not evident in the regulatory requirements that govern daily practice.
- 6. Accountability:** Across all 13 jurisdictions, there is no accountability mechanism that requires any of the four components — early learning frameworks, licensing regulations, standards of practice, or post-secondary preparation — to align with one another. Until accountability mechanisms are built across all four components simultaneously, the four-way disconnect will persist regardless of how progressive individual early learning frameworks become.

Recommendations

The scan moves beyond review and analysis to recommendations, which are organized around four action pathways, each identifying the responsible parties for change. These pathways are not sequential, and progress on all four simultaneously is required to close the four-way disconnect.

1 System Alignment

Provincial and territorial governments; Indigenous governments; licensing bodies; post-secondary institutions; professional associations; sector researchers and funders

2 Regulatory Reform

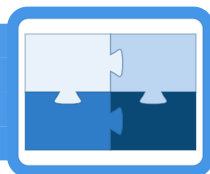
Provincial and territorial governments

3 Early Learning Framework Development

Provincial and territorial governments; early learning framework developers; Indigenous governments and organizations

4 Educator Preparation & Professional Learning

Post-secondary institutions; provincial and territorial ECE regulatory bodies and professional associations; provincial/territorial governments



Resolving the
four-way
disconnect

Summary of Recommendations

The recommendations below are a summary. Find the full recommendations, including detailed actions and responsible parties, in [Section 8 of the scan \(p. 26\)](#).

Pathway 1: System Alignment

Provincial and territorial governments; Indigenous governments; licensing bodies; post-secondary institutions; professional associations; sector researchers and funders

Piecemeal reform will not close the four-way disconnect. What is required is a coordinated, government-led, community-participatory reform of all four components simultaneously — early learning frameworks, licensing regulations, standards of practice, and post-secondary preparation — designed from the outset to move together.

- Establish a government-led Outdoor and Land-based Early Learning Reform Table.
- Align licensing regulations with early learning frameworks.
- Use regulatory reform as the legislative vehicle to mandate alignment across funding and subsidy structures, professional preparation standards, and quality assessment frameworks.
- Centre Indigenous self-determination throughout implementation.
- Build in knowledge mobilization from the start.
- Develop public-facing accountability mechanisms that track progress across all four components.

Pathway 2: Regulatory Reform

Provincial and territorial governments

Access to high-quality, outdoor and land-based learning across a variety of environments and landscapes is a universal equity issue. Every child in Canada, regardless of family income, geographic location, or ability, deserves meaningful engagement with outdoor and land-based programming. Regulatory reform in multiple domains is required to enable equitable access to high-quality learning experiences for all children.

Risk, challenge, and children's rights

- Adopt risk-benefit assessment frameworks in licensing regulations.
- Revise restrictive fencing, surfacing, and equipment requirements.
- Explicitly permit risky play as developmentally beneficial.
- Shift supervision from mandatory line-of-sight to risk-assessed approaches.
- Integrate children's rights (UNCRC Article 31; UNDRIP) as a foundational principle in licensing frameworks.

Indigenous self-determination and land-based pedagogy

- Enable Indigenous governance of land-based early learning through distinctions-based pathways.
- Recognize Elders' and Knowledge Keepers' roles as educators and leaders.

- Co-develop regulatory approaches that are distinctions-based and regionally responsive.
- Provide sustained, flexible resources for Indigenous-led program development.
- Clarify terminology and accountability: reserve ‘Indigenous land-based’ for Indigenous-led or Indigenous-governed programming.

Facility-based ELCC programs: within and beyond the fence

- Adapt facility and material requirements with greater flexibility; streamline approval processes.
- Consider community assets in the licensing process.
- Create OLB-specific guidance for programs operating regularly in natural environments beyond licensed premises.
- Require continuous professional learning focused on outdoor and land-based knowledge and competencies.

A distinct regulatory category for outdoor and land-based programs

- Create differentiated licensing pathways for OLBs — drawing on models from Washington State, Germany, and Denmark.
- Ensure licensing reforms explicitly enable public funding for OLBs.
- Ensure funding supports programs in providing gear.
- Enable partnerships with municipalities, conservation authorities, and land managers.
- Support diverse geographic contexts — urban, rural, remote, Northern — and require accessibility for children with diverse abilities.

Pathway 3: Early Learning Framework Development

Provincial and territorial governments; early learning framework developers; Indigenous governments and organizations

Canada’s early learning frameworks already affirm outdoor and land-based learning more strongly than licensing regulations. The task is to consolidate and extend that leadership.

- Update frameworks in all jurisdictions to explicitly name outdoor and land-based learning as a distinct pedagogical approach.
- Establish formal mechanisms requiring regulations to align with framework commitments.
- Embed Indigenous land-based learning in frameworks through Nation-to-Nation co-development processes.
- Integrate the eight core competency domains into framework guidance.

Pathway 4: Educator Preparation and Professional Learning (*including Standards of Practice*)

Post-secondary institutions; provincial and territorial ECE regulatory bodies and professional associations; provincial/territorial governments

Regulatory reform will require educators to have the knowledge and skills to bring outdoor and land-based learning to life. Educator preparation must be treated as a central pillar that is built deliberately, funded adequately, and held to the same standard of accountability as the regulatory changes that accompany it.

- Develop Standards of Practice for outdoor and land-based ECE through a collaborative and regionally responsive process.
- Integrate the eight core competency domains into post-secondary ECE program standards across all jurisdictions as core curriculum.
- Provide accessible professional learning for practicing educators; train regulatory staff to support outdoor and land-based approaches.
- Embed outdoor and land-based learning as an explicit quality indicator in accountability frameworks.

Conclusion

As the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (CWELCC) initiative continues to unfold, coherent policy frameworks are required to support all children's opportunities for high-quality outdoor and land-based learning, reflecting lessons from international jurisdictions that have successfully integrated outdoor and land-based early learning into their ELCC systems. This scan offers a practical instrument to support policymakers and all responsible parties in fully enabling outdoor and land-based early childhood education for every child across Canada.

Where to Go Next

The full Environmental Scan can be found at lawson.ca/OLBEnvScan and is structured to support different entry points depending on your role and interest:

- **For a rapid overview:** the [Executive Summary](#) and [Section 7 \(Cross-Cutting Themes\)](#).
- **For regulatory decision-makers:** [Section 4 \(Regulations\)](#) and [Section 8, Pathway 2 \(Regulatory Reform\)](#).
- **For curriculum and early learning framework developers:** [Section 5 \(Early Learning Frameworks\)](#) and [Section 8, Pathway 3 \(Early Learning Framework Development\)](#).
- **For educator preparation and standards bodies:** [Section 6 \(Standards of Practice\)](#) and [Section 8, Pathway 4 \(Educator Preparation and Professional Learning\)](#).
- **For Indigenous communities and organizations:** [Section 3 \(Literature Review\)](#), [Section 4 \(Regulations: Tension 3\)](#), and the Indigenous-specific pathways throughout [Section 8](#).
- **For those working on system-wide coordination:** [Section 7](#) and [Section 8, Pathway 1 \(System Alignment\)](#).
- **For a jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction summary** of all 13 Canadian provinces and territories, organized alphabetically: [Appendix D \(Provincial & Territorial Summaries\)](#).