



ARIZONA  
ASSOCIATION FOR  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
EDUCATION

# Environmental Literacy Community of Practice

## *Community Charter*

### **Vision**

A vibrant and ecologically sustainable future for Arizona with a well-informed and engaged population comprised of socially and ecologically responsible people and institutions.

### **Mission**

Educate, Inspire, and Empower one another to actively and responsibly engage in our communities ecologically, socially, and civically.

The Environmental Literacy Community of Practice (ELCoP) is a convening of practitioners and supporters of environmental education to collectively develop solutions that foster an *environmentally literate* population in Arizona. Anyone who supports and promotes *environmental education* and people's connection to nature is invited and encouraged to contribute experience, knowledge and/or resources toward concrete solutions that are developed collaboratively.

### **Why form a community of practice?**

Arizona has a rich diversity of people, agencies, businesses and organizations that are working to connect populations of children and adults with learning experiences that encourage outdoor time, develop critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, and foster strong connections between Arizonans and their human and non-human communities. The experiences being offered fall on a spectrum from self-directed outdoor play to academic, standards-based classroom programs with a focus on environmental learning. All share the common interest of supporting healthy, vibrant, active and empowered people.

### **Environmental Education**

You are EE! Environmental education (EE) is an organized effort to empower people and communities to work together towards a more ecologically sustainable future through education about our natural and built environments, and how humans can shift their behavior to coexist and develop sustainably.

### **Environmental Literacy**

An environmentally literate person is someone who, both individually and together with others, makes informed decisions concerning the environment; is willing to act on these decisions to improve the wellbeing of other individuals, societies, and global environment; and participates in civic life.

While each of these entities is "moving the needle" in their own way, they each face similar challenges of lack of access, resources, and information; misperceptions about the intent of environmental learning; and a variety of real and perceived barriers experienced by potential learners. A community of practice provides a structure through which all of these entities can combine knowledge, experiences and resources to address these challenges with real solutions. The ELCoP is a way to take collective action!

## **Why focus on Environmental Education?**

Environmental education (EE) offered in formal, nonformal and informal learning environments contributes to the development of environmental literacy. EE teaches children and adults how to learn about and investigate their environment and emphasizes direct interactions with nature and outdoor learning environments.

From an academic perspective, students that participate in EE have improved performance in reading, math, science, and social studies. They also have a decrease in classroom discipline problems. Students are able to transfer knowledge to unfamiliar contexts and are able to “do science” rather than just learn about it (NEETF, 2005).

By the time a student graduates high school, they will have spent almost 20,000 hours of their life in a school, and the environmental sustainability features of these schools are as important as the curriculum being taught in the classrooms. Sustainable schools have been found to: enhance student learning, increase educational enrichment, increase student performance, use about 30% less energy and water, increase state competitiveness, and reduce social inequity (Frisk and Larson, 2011; Kats, 2006; Turner Construction, 2005; UNESCO, 1997; Wiek, Withycombe, and Redman, 2011).

Arizonans rate the state’s natural beauty and outdoor parks and trails as some of its greatest assets (Gallup Arizona Poll, 2009). However, the EPA has found that Americans spend 90% of their lives indoors (cfpub.epa.gov). A 2011 survey spearheaded by The Nature Conservancy found that only about 10% of kids between the ages of 13-18 spend time every day outdoors. This limited time outdoors is leading to the emerging Nature Deficit Disorder. This disorder has been linked to “epidemic rises in childhood obesity, increasing social and cognitive delays as our children enter the school systems and rises in diagnoses of Attention Deficit/Hyper-Active Disorder” (Louv, 2005).

Environmentally literate people have 21st century skills and are prepared for emerging careers that create a vibrant economy for Arizona. By 2018, employment in STEM jobs will increase twice as much as all other jobs, and environmental jobs will increase by 25% by 2016 and 15% by 2022 (NEEF, 2015; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Sustainability is also becoming an important feature of many businesses. In a recent study, nearly 75% of businesses had a strong interest in educating their employees about their corporate sustainability goals (GreenBiz Group Employee Engagement survey, 2014).

## Who can participate?

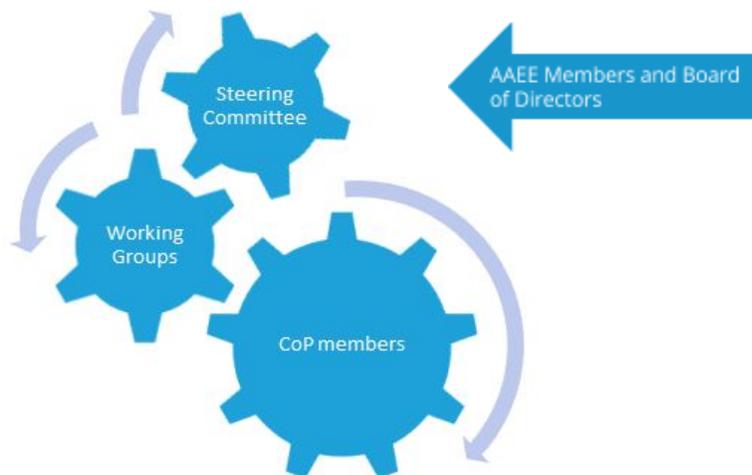
Anyone who supports and promotes environmental education and peoples' connection to nature. The ELCoP welcomes diverse perspectives and approaches. *Any work that creates positive connections between people and their natural environment makes a relevant contribution to environmental literacy and has an important voice.*

## How does the ELCoP work?

Broadly speaking, the ELCoP identifies key challenges that the members can tackle together and takes action to create solutions. Specifically, the ELCoP operates under the structure below.

### The ELCoP Culture

- We get things done and tell people about it
- We foster broad, statewide participation
- We actively participate in each other's programs and events



## Steering Committee

The work of the ELCoP is guided by a steering committee, one of the core committees within the AAEE membership structure. *Steering committee members meet monthly on the third Tuesday at 8 a.m., via AAEE's online meeting room.*

The steering committee:

- Develops and monitors the overall structure of the ELCoP
- Actively identifies and recruits new voices to the ELCoP
- Guides the identification of key challenges that the ELCoP tackles
- Develops and facilitates a quarterly convening of the ELCoP
- Actively connects with ELCoP members to support their core work (programs and events offered by ELCoP members)
- Evaluates the outcomes of the ELCoP

Steering committee members are required to:

- Participate in the majority of monthly meetings and quarterly convenings of the general CoP membership
- Complete an AAEE volunteer application
- Hold an active AAEE membership

### **Working Groups**

For each key challenge that the CoP collectively agrees to take on, a working group will be formed that will focus specifically on solutions for the challenge. Working groups will be led by one or two champions that agree to dedicate extra time toward facilitating the group. Champions provide regular updates to the steering committee.



Each working group:

- Communicates and collaborates regularly, in a manner defined by the group itself (AAEE provides tools to support communication and collaboration)
- Uses brainstorming, discussions and necessary research to propose solutions associated with the assigned challenge
- Develops action plans for each proposed solution
- Presents action plans to the larger CoP membership to garner active participation

Working group members are required to:

- Participate in the majority of work done by the group
- Hold an active AAEE membership

### **Community of Practice General Members**

Individuals that are not able to participate in the steering committee or a working group can be general members of the ELCoP. Members will receive regular updates from the working groups, be asked to complete surveys and/or share thoughts on working group topics, and be invited to participate in quarterly gatherings hosted by the steering committee.

General members are required to:

- Provide an email address to receive updates, invitations and other correspondence
- General members who hold active AAEE memberships will be able to participate in online member forums

## **Quarterly Convenings**

Four times each calendar year, the steering committee will coordinate and facilitate a convening for all working group and general members of the ELCOP. The convening will be held both in-person and virtually to allow statewide participation. The steering committee will work to hold the in-person portion of the convening in a different geographical part of the state each quarter.

Quarterly convenings include:

- Updates from working groups
- Opportunities to provide feedback on action plans
- Opportunities to provide feedback on key challenges
- Opportunities to network
- A professional development presentation that is relevant to one of the working group topics
- Celebration of member activities