

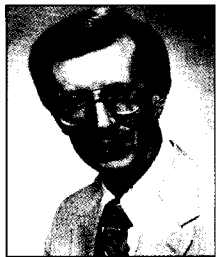
A Superintendent Looks at Outdoor Education

BY BARRY MAHORNEY

How do those responsible for the educational program of a conference—or a school, for that matter—justify taking three or four days out of the classroom for students to go to a camp or some other location for outdoor education? This question deserves an answer.

I believe that outdoor education is not just viable and justifiable, but essential. However, on more than one occasion, I have had to defend its value to a skeptical school board or even the K-12 board of education, especially in the early days of our program in the Dakotas. However, on one occasion, it was not the board, but a parent. I knew this parent held very high academic expectations for his children.

One Sabbath when I spoke at his church, he asked to talk with me about the outdoor school his oldest daughter had just attended. Immediately, I began assembling all the reasons why outdoor education is a valuable experience for kids and why taking time from the “regular” program of education is justifiable.



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When he came up to me, his first words were, “Thanks for what you are doing for our children in the outdoor education program.” This was not what I expected to hear! When his daughter came

home and shared her experience at outdoor school, such as learning to use a map and compass, he was thrilled. He had tried to teach her these things, but it was not until she went to outdoor school that she got excited about learning these valuable skills.

Will everyone embrace outdoor education, especially if it means “missing school”? Probably not. But as students get excited about a good outdoor education program, parents usually recognize its value. In fact, my strongest supporters have been parents who have participated as counselors or have volunteered to help with a class.

Because not everyone buys into outdoor education, our program is strictly voluntary. This has allayed some fears of the K-12 board and even local school boards. It is important for the leadership to have a firm commitment to the program, to understand its value and to articulate its purposes and goals without embarrassment. Today, after nearly 11 years of outdoor education programs, I am convinced more than ever of their value.

Let me share a story that helped seal my belief in the importance of getting students into God’s great outdoors. As a project/assignment for a class in Outdoor Ministries taught by Dr. Carl Swafford at Southern Adventist University in Col-

legedale, Tennessee, the class was divided into teams of four to five persons and told to prepare a series of outdoor nature activities for the children at a local summer day camp. My group was to plan five one-hour classes for the 5-year-old campers. *This will be a snap*, I thought. *You can do anything with kids that age and succeed.*

At the beginning of our first class period, having gathered the campers for singing and worship, I knew we were in trouble. Nicholas announced, so all could hear, that he was not going to have a good time. We tried to ignore him, but he seemed serious. And he believed that if he wasn't going to have fun, neither should anyone else. He wouldn't join in any of the activities and complained continuously.

By day two, there seemed to be a glimmer of hope. If you watched closely, you could almost see Nicholas thinking about participating. And on day three, it was clear that he was going to finally involve

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himself—and even showed signs of having fun.

At the end of class on day three, we were nearly late getting the campers back for their next activities. To save time, we decided to cross the lawn, which was still wet from dew. To keep Nicholas from getting his shoes wet, I picked him up. Hurrying across the lawn, I asked him what

he had learned that day. His answer came without hesitation, “Be quiet when Jesus is talking.” Had he really heard Jesus talking during our nature activities? That day, the student became the teacher. Days four and five were wonderful.

I have never forgotten that experience. But it was not the only time I have seen dramatic turn-arounds in the attitudes of students who came to outdoor school with high walls built around them. Brick by brick, those walls have come down, and the least-likely students would often say, “Thank you. I had a good time, and I am coming back next year.”

Outdoor education involves students in practical experiences in the outdoors in order to help them become familiar and comfortable with the natural world and to develop a deeper relationship with the Creator. My personal philosophy for outdoor education doesn't leave a lot of room for going outside and diagramming sentences and doing long division, unless the long division is part of a practical out-

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door experience, such as measuring the height of a tree. In other words, outdoor education is not just taking the things we normally do in school (as valuable as those things are) and doing them out-of-doors.

My goal for outdoor education is for the students to be overwhelmed with the greatness of God and to see in His handiwork the message of His eternal love for them. While this is a lofty goal and not really measurable or ever fully reached, our outdoor education teams must plan for this in their schedule. What is not accomplished in individual classes can be attempted through morning and evening worship. These are perfect times to point to the Creator and Sustainer of all things and to tie together all the activities of the program.

Here is a brief glimpse of some of the activities and classwork that I have found to be successful. In the Dakota Conference, we ran the program for students in grades 5 to 8, because of the small number of students in each grade. In the Gulf States Conference, where I am currently

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located, outdoor school is for students in grades 5 and 6. For three days, the students are divided into four groups, which are rotated through four two-hour classes.

Mini-classes have included trees, orienteering, survival and safety, environmental awareness, weather, cemetery study, animal tracking, and a craft class using natural materials. In Gulf States, we spend one afternoon taking the students on a field trip or involve them in round-robin challenge events.

As a busy superintendent, you don't need just another program on your plate.

While I have been heavily involved in the outdoor education planning because of my personal interest, I have always had teachers who gave strong leadership and were able planners. When I read statements like the following, I really believe outdoor education needs and deserves our commitment and effort:

“While the Bible should hold first place in the education of children and youth, the book of nature is next in importance” (*Counsels to Teachers*, p. 185).

Maybe some of your students, too, will learn to be quiet when Jesus is talking. ☞

Barry Mahorney, former Superintendent of Schools for the Gulf States Conference, is currently a pastor in the same conference. He was heavily involved in outdoor education nearly all 11 years when he served as superintendent, and has conducted several workshops to help families see the benefits of participating in outdoor experiences. He writes from Killen, Alabama. Kids' Ministries Ideas will be publishing his third article on nature activities this summer.

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