

# How to make an argument for environmental literacy in schools

## Key questions:

- Who?
- What?
- How?





# Who?

# Message recipients *and* messengers

## Know your audience

- What are the politics? Go to meetings; find out what you can.
- What persuasive arguments are likely to resonate?
- What words or phrases might actually be triggering (in a bad way)?
  - “Environmental” education vs. “Outdoor” or “Outdoor heritage” education
  - “Social-emotional learning” vs. “positive \_\_\_ outcomes for our kids” vs. “character development”
  - “Connection to nature” vs. “new opportunities for real world learning”
- Who do you need to convince first?
  - Early → often individual teachers can be powerful champions
  - Later → administrations and school boards

## Who should be the communicator?

- Should they hear from you, teachers, principals, parents, researchers, students?
- Superintendents from other school districts?
- Might depend on the stage of adoption

## How is trust built?

### **Rational trust: expectation of positive outcomes**

- Based on perceptions of competence, follow through, consistency, quality

### **Affinitive trust: personal affinity or “liking”**

- Avoiding “out-group” signals
- Listening, demonstrating care/respect, exposing similarities

### **Systems-based trust: Setting up a system that reduces uncertainty**

- Understanding fears, risks and accountabilities
- Setting up processes together
- Working together to overcome barriers

### **Make it worthwhile**

- The benefits outweigh the costs

### **Make it fit**

- It must align with school/community culture

### **Make it easy**

- Remove barriers

## **Make it worthwhile; Make it fit**

- Choose your arguments to align with the local culture – use accepted terms, avoid triggering language
- Choose your evidence
  - Data from peer-reviewed studies
  - Stories and anecdotes
- Potential outcomes include:
  - Enhanced student learning, self-efficacy, motivation, social relationships, health, 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, connection with nature
  - Enhanced classroom climate
  - Teacher enjoyment, professional development, morale, and retention
  - Intergenerational learning; creating nostalgia and legacy through long-term partnerships with outdoor programming; access

## Make it easy

- Align with curriculum
- Align with natural rhythms of the school day, week, month, year.
- Provide a clear picture of what the EL initiative ***looks like*** and how it can fit in to the way the school district already operates.
  - *Field trips? On-campus experiences? In class stuff?*
  - *What would feel like a natural fit?*
- Provide a means to start small.
- Call on others to share their experiences.
- Demonstrate how others have implemented and benefited.

## **Listen first**

- Which outcomes might matter most?
- What are the barriers (material, political, social, or other)?
- What is the baseline?

## **Pursue trusting relationships**

- Avoid triggering language
- Who is the best communicator? Teachers, you, administrators?
- How can you build rational, affinitive, and systems-based trust?

## **Consider which evidence your target audience wants/needs to hear**

- Statistics vs. vivid storytelling.
- Align with culture, norms, and rhythms
- Choose 3-5 arguments at most; leave out weak arguments
- ***Make it worthwhile; Make it fit; Make it easy***



# Good luck and stick with it!



## **Dr. Marc J. Stern**

Professor

Department of Forest Resources and  
Environmental Conservation

Virginia Tech

[mjstern@vt.edu](mailto:mjstern@vt.edu)

