



Wilderness Inquiry Youth Evaluation External Report 2024

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Abstract

Research shows that there are myriad benefits from nature contact and learning in the outdoors, such as demonstrated gains in social-emotional learning (SEL) capacities, an increase in overall happiness and well-being, and improved academic outcomes. Wilderness Inquiry piloted a research-based evaluation tool created by Hello Insight, to measure youth program success in increasing SEL capacities, which is foundational to youth experiencing positive wellbeing and academic outcomes.

Wilderness Inquiry measured SEL capacities of youth participants before and after Outdoor Credit Recovery and Extended Camping Trips. The data showed that these outdoor programs contributed to significant growth in areas of social-emotional learning (SEL) amongst high schoolers and middle schoolers. Participants showed the most growth in 1) self-management (93%); 2) academic self-efficacy (84%); 3) social skills (84%); 4) connection to the outdoors (82%); 5) well-being in the outdoors (80%); and 6) contribution (80%).

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Introduction

The goals of Wilderness Inquiry's evaluation process are to:

		
<p>Improve Program Implementation</p>	<p>Guide program participants to appropriate programs and settings</p>	<p>Increase program funding</p>
<p><i>Evaluation results will be reviewed and shared with staff to make ongoing and long-term programmatic changes.</i></p>	<p><i>Evaluation results will be shared with program participants and the community to help individuals and organizations determine if Wilderness Inquiry programs align with their goals and desired outcomes.</i></p>	<p><i>Evaluation results will be shared with funders and other stakeholders to demonstrate impact and the need for continued or increased funding so that program opportunities remain financially accessible.</i></p>

Organization Mission

Wilderness Inquiry's mission is to connect people of all ages, backgrounds, identities, and abilities through shared outdoor adventures so that everyone can equitably experience the benefits of time spent in nature.

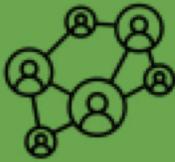
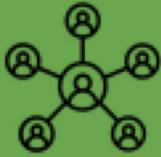
Through the medium of outdoor adventure travel, we inspire personal growth, enhanced awareness of the environment, and community integration. Wilderness Inquiry's adventures encourage people to open themselves to new possibilities and opportunities. We evaluated two of Wilderness Inquiry's youth programs using Hello Insight's youth evaluation tool including Extended Camping Trips and Outdoor Credit Recovery.

1. Wilderness Inquiry's extended camping trips solidify outdoor and interpersonal skills while experiencing a wilderness area such as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, Yellowstone National Park, Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, and more. Each experience that was evaluated lasted between 4 and 6 days.

- Outdoor Credit Recovery offers an attractive experiential learning solution. In efforts to assist and incentivize Minnesota youth to stay on track to graduate, this program provides a place-based, and hands-on approach for high school students to recover academic credits. The program lasted eight days per student cohort.

Program Focus Goals

Wilderness Inquiry trained their staff to focus on these four key themes that all revolve around **building connections** during program implementation using the below tactics.

			
<p>Build Positive, Caring Connections between Outdoor Leaders and Participants</p>	<p>Increase Awareness of the Connections between Nature and Participants</p>	<p>Provide Growth Opportunities for Participants to Connect to their Inner Selves</p>	<p>Provide Growth Opportunities for Participants to Connect to their Community</p>

Some of the ways we build connections is to start out our experiences with a Welcome Circle that is fun, welcoming, inclusive, and builds trust between participants and outdoor leaders, then we close out the experience with a Closing Circle that encourages participants to reflect and share. During activities, outdoor leaders build a sense of community among participants by providing opportunities for teamwork, problem-solving, and having participants choose a team name for canoe paddlers. Throughout the outdoor experience, participants are encouraged to connect to their inner selves through reflection, taking time to stop and take in nature’s sounds, smells, sights, and impact on wellbeing. Lastly, Wilderness Inquiry connects participants to their local parks and waterways and takes the time to hear what participants are enjoying and providing guidance on how to access the outdoors and outdoor recreation.

Throughout Wilderness Inquiry youth programs, young people gain 21st-century skills and develop social and emotional capacities that correlate with long-term gains in high school completion, college/career readiness, and increased life-long thriving. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively

apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Growing evidence shows that SEL qualities rival academic or technical skills in their ability to predict employment and earnings, among other outcomes. While the demand for such skills has increased over the past 20 years, many employers around the world have reported that job candidates lack the soft skills needed to fill available positions.

In the face of current societal economic, environmental, and social challenges, the promotion of these non-academic skills is seen as more critical than ever before with business and political leaders urging schools to pay more attention to equipping students with soft skills such as positive identity, social skills, self-management, social capital, academic self-efficacy, and a sense of contribution – often referred to as SEL or “21st Century Skills” ([CASEL](#), 2022). To meet these needs, Wilderness Inquiry’s programs integrate essential research-based practices that have been shown to promote these types of outcomes for young people. In addition, these skills are regularly assessed to assure that each young person is on a pathway toward success.

To accomplish this, Wilderness Inquiry used an online learning and evaluation platform – Hello Insight to deploy scientifically validated tools and analytics that have been tested and statistically validated through surveying more than 250,000 young people, in over 1,500 programs, in over 750 organizations nation-wide. This field standard platform allows Wilderness Inquiry to benchmark young people’s outcome growth against other young people with similar attributes, assuring that the growth they see is meaningful and significant.

Pre/Post surveys measure SEL skill development during Wilderness Inquiry programs and assess youth’s experience of key positive youth development practices that have been correlated with the types of SEL growth that lead to long-term academic gains, career and workforce development, positive behaviors, and increased thriving. These surveys were used for Outdoor Credit Recovery and Youth Extended Trips.

Evidence Base

According to CASEL, “SEL (social and emotional learning) is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.” (CASEL, 2022) There is growing evidence that SEL qualities rival academic or technical skills in their ability to predict employment and earnings (Kautz, Heckman, Diris, ter Weel, & Borghans, 2014), increased academic success, decreased risk, and increased thriving (CASEL, 2022). The demand for such nonacademic skills has increased over the past 20 years (Balcar, 2014; Carnevale, 2013; Eger & Grossmann, 2004; International Labor Organization, 2008) and their promotion is more critical than ever — with business and political leaders urging schools to pay more attention to equipping students with skills like problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and self-management, often referred to as “21st Century Skills” (CASEL, 2022).

Definitions

Emerging Core SEL For young people with Emerging Core SEL, growth is a value defined as a statistically significant change from pre to post.

Advanced Core SEL For young people with Advanced Core SEL, maintaining their pre-score or showing any positive increases.

Reflect on Outdoor Exploration A young person's experience with an adult who takes time to create attentive, critical, and exploratory thoughts about spending time in the outdoors. Reflecting on Outdoor Exploration involves observing and developing awareness of the interdependence of living things and feelings and thoughts toward nature. Research says that this experience increases concern and respect for all living things.

Foster Outdoor Exploration A young person's experience with an adult who encourages them to explore natural environments and develop a personal interest in the outdoors. Foster Outdoor Exploration involves promoting interest in the natural environment and exploring the relationship with other living and nonliving things. This experience has been shown to increase young people's healthy habits, such as physical activity, and in the long-term, indicators of wellness like better concentration and a greater sense of freedom.

Engage Authentically Engage Authentically is a young person's experience with an adult who takes the time to get to know them by listening and understanding who they are — their cultural and lived experiences, their interests, and their passions. Engaging authentically involves placing young people's personal stories at the center of the program's work and ensuring that they feel valued, heard, and cared for by adults. This is a Foundational Experience for young people, or one that lays the groundwork for all of the others in Hello Insight's logic model.

Promote Peer Bonds Promote Peer Bonds is a young person's experience with an adult who helps them work with peers in teams and groups, creating a safe space to learn with and from one another, exploring similarities and differences, and developing deep bonds and relationships. Promoting peer bonds involves supporting young people to share and value one another's unique perspectives, experiences, strengths, and ideas. This is a Foundational Experience for young people, bolstering all other positive youth development (PYD) practices measured by Hello Insight.

Expand Interests Expand Interests is a young person's experience with an adult who supports them to try new things, broaden their horizons, learn about other people's cultures and perspectives, and explore their own identities. Expanding interests involves exposing young people to new ideas, experiences, and places.

Challenge Growth Challenge Growth is a young person's experience with an adult who encourages them to take risks and perform beyond their own expectations. Challenging growth involves four actions: 1) Staff expect young people to do their best and to live up to their potential; 2) They stretch and encourage young people to go further than they imagine; 3) Staff support young people to reflect on failures and to learn from mistakes; and 4) They hold young people accountable by supporting them to take responsibility for their actions.

Data

Population

Over the course of the 2024 youth programming season (June-September), Wilderness Inquiry's evaluation tool assessed the SEL skills of 56 young people at the beginning of the program (pre) and at the end of the program (post). The capacities we measured included: Positive Identity, Self-Management, Contribution, Academic Self-Efficacy, Social Skills, and Social Capital.

Demographics

- The **Ethnicity** of young people who participated in Wilderness Inquiry's program is 29% Asian, 23% Latino(a)(x), 21% Black or African American, 18% White, 5% Two or more races, 2% American Indian, 1% No Response.
- The **Gender** of young people who participated in Wilderness Inquiry's program is 63% Male, 32% Female, 5% Chose Not to Describe, and 7% Chose to Describe.
- The **Grade** of young people who participated in Wilderness Inquiry's program were 75% High Schoolers, 18% Other, 7% No Response.
- The **Age** of young people who participated in Wilderness Inquiry's program are 59% 16-17 years old, 25% 18+, and 16% 14-15 years old.

Key Findings

Definition of Post-Benchmarks

Post Benchmark Success falls into one of three categories:

1. Fewer Young People Made Gains Than Typical (a group's growth rate is very low when compared to the national norm). Defined as <65%.
2. A Typical Number of Young People Who Made Gains (a group's growth rate is average when compared to the national norm). Defined as 65% to 84% [Many].
3. More Young People Who Made Gains Than the Typical (a group's growth rate is very high when compared to the national norm). Defined as 90%+ [Almost All].

Wilderness Inquiry is aiming for 70% or higher to define success.

Core SEL Benchmark

Extended Trips

Core SEL

Most (98%) young people in the program showed meaningful effect size gains in one or more SEL outcomes, almost all (91%) grew in three or more, and many (54%) grew in all five SEL outcome areas.

Benchmark Findings

At pre, multi-day program consisted of mostly advanced, and some emerging young people. By post, this program was meeting the national benchmark. Wilderness Inquiry's overall programs are performing on par with Hello Insight's national benchmark for successful SEL Growth, with **multiple trips exceeding the national benchmark**. In other words, young people in Wilderness Inquiry's program are developing SEL skills at the same rate or higher than their peers attending high-quality programs across the country. Young people were matched with peers based on pre-SEL scores, age, gender identity, and ethnicity.

SEL Capacity Data

Most (86%) young people in this program developed **Core SEL**. Core SEL summarizes the five SEL capacities that are all interdependent, and positively affect the development of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral factors in young people's lives.

Most (93%) of the young people in this program developed **Self-Management**. Self-management is a critical aspect of social and emotional learning. In the CASEL framework, it is described as "abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations. This includes the capacities to delay gratification, manage stress, and feel motivation and agency to accomplish personal and collective goals." Self-management correlates with longer-term outcomes such as higher academic performance, lower engagement in negative behaviors, and improved social acceptance by peers (Bandy, T. & Moore, K.A., 2010).

Many (80%) of the young people in this program developed a sense of **Contribution**. Contribution is a critical aspect of social and emotional learning. In the CASEL framework, it is considered part of responsible decision-making or "the ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations. This includes the capacities to consider ethical standards and safety concerns and to evaluate the benefits and consequences of various actions for personal, social, and collective well-being". Contribution has been correlated with a propensity to engage civically as adults, maintain positive links to the institutions of civic society, and improved social development (Lerner, R. M., et al., 2005).

Many (84%) of the young people in this program developed *Academic Self Efficacy* which is a critical aspect of social and emotional learning. In the CASEL framework, it is considered part of self-awareness or “the ability to understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.” Academic Self-Efficacy is a young person’s motivation and perceived mastery over their own learning, school performance, and potential to attain academic success. It is correlated with higher grade point averages and standardized test scores, fewer suspensions and expulsions, as well as longer-term gains in skills to identify, attain, and retain a career (Afterschool Alliance, 2009; Zins, J.E., et al., 2004).

Many (79%) of the young people in this program developed a **Positive Identity**. Positive Identity is a critical aspect of social and emotional learning. In the CASEL framework, it is considered part of self-awareness or “the ability to understand one’s own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts. This includes capacities to recognize one’s strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose.” Positive identity helps young people develop resilience in the face of challenges and is correlated with higher confidence and reduced behavioral problems (McLaughlin, M.W., 2000).

Many (84%) of the young people in this program developed **Social Skills** which is the ability of a young person to take others’ perspectives into account and to develop a sense of caring and empathy. Social skills are important to development because they support positive social interactions and promote positive interactions between young people and their environment (Payton, J.W. et al., 2008).

Most (82%) young people in this program demonstrated gains in at least one **Outdoor SEL Capacity** which captures three independent capacities—Connection to the Outdoors, Well-being in the Outdoors, and Support for the Environment—that indicate young people’s development in an outdoors setting. Young people who show Outdoors SEL create a bond with the outdoors and nature, increase their well-being when they are in the outdoors, and become champions of the environment.

Most (82%) young people in this program demonstrated gains in **Connection to the Outdoors**, which is a young person’s bond with nature or the outdoors. Young people who feel a greater connection to the outdoors tend to be more engaged in diverse forms of independent and creative play. In the long term, they are more likely to have a sense of personal autonomy, an improved self-concept, and a greater capacity to take action and be decisive (Children and Nature, 2018).

Most (80%) young people in this program demonstrated gains in **Well-Being in the Outdoors**, which is a young person's feeling that their physical and mental wellness is enhanced by being in nature or the outdoors. Young people who have positive feelings toward nature have better life satisfaction, vitality, and enthusiasm. In the long term, they are more likely to have a greater purpose in life, autonomy, and personal growth (Nisbet & Zelenski, 2013).

Many (64%) young people in this program demonstrated gains in **Support for the Environment**, which is a young person's concern for environmental problems and their desire to be part of the solution. Young people who have developed this capacity demonstrate increased empathy and willingness to help. In the long term, young people who show support for the environment are more likely to express a greater sense of caring and altruistic attitudes, especially toward nature (Whitburn et al., 2019).

Experience Findings

Foster Outdoor Exploration

This experience has been shown to increase young people's healthy habits, such as physical activity, and in the long-term, indicators of wellness like better concentration and a greater sense of freedom (Chawla, 2015). **Most (87%)** of the young people in this program reported that Wilderness Inquiry staff fostered outdoor exploration with them.

Reflecting on Outdoor Exploration

Research says that this experience increases concern and respect for all living things (Chawla, 2015). **Most (85%)** of the young people in this program reported that Wilderness Inquiry staff helped them reflect on their outdoor exploration.

Engage Authentically

Building these types of relationships has been shown to increase positive youth development and thriving (Larson, R. & Dawes, N. 2015, Search Institute, 2020). Empirical research shows that the number of hours young people spend in a program, or the number of activities they engage in, does not make a difference (Flores, K. 2018; Pekel, K. 2016; Pekel, K., et al., 2015). Rather, it's positive, meaningful relationships with adults that really drive social and emotional learning. **Most (94%)** of the young people in this program reported that Wilderness Inquiry staff engaged authentically with them.

Promote Peer Bonds

Positive peer engagement increases self-confidence and life skills; academic motivation; and leadership skills and disposition (Search Institute, 2020). **Most (85%)** of the young people in this program reported that Wilderness Inquiry staff promoted peer bonds.

Challenge Growth

Challenging growth can influence many parts of a young person's life and development. It promotes resilience (Zhang, Y., et al., 2011), strengthens their ability to stay focused on achieving their long-term goals (Steele, C.M. 2011), enhances their academic performance (Bowen, G., et al., 2012), increases civic participation (Mesurado, B., et al., 2014), enhances athletic and sports achievement (Bremer, K., 2012), improves nutrition and healthy habits (Gable, S., & Lutz, S., 2012), and reduces alcohol or tobacco use (Nash, S. G., et al., 2005). **Most (93%)** of the young people in this program reported that Wilderness Inquiry staff challenged their growth.

Expand Interests

This has been shown to increase school engagement and high school graduation rates; promote healthy behaviors and decrease risky behaviors; increase overall satisfaction with life (Search Institute, 2020); increase a sense of contribution and desire to give back; and promote a healthy positive identity (Benson, P.L. 2006; Scales, P.C., et al., 2011). **Most (82%)** of the young people in this program reported that Wilderness Inquiry staff helped them expand their interests.

Managing Goals

This has been shown to increase motivation, impact our perceived control over our future, and promote overall positive youth development (Lerner, R.M., et al., 2011; Houston, E. 2020). **Many (62%)** of the young people in this program reported that Wilderness Inquiry staff helped them manage their goals.

Sharing Power

This has been shown to enhance problem-solving skills, build effective communication skills, increase critical consciousness, and ignite a sense of contribution and civic engagement (Sabo Flores, K., 2013; Ginwright, S. & James T., 2002; Zeldin, Z. et al., 2000). **Over half (59%)** of the young people in this program reported that Wilderness Inquiry staff shared power with them.

2024 Program Spotlight

Wilderness Inquiry youth programs offer three multi-day experience types, which include Outdoor Credit Recovery, Extended Camping Trips, and Near Nature Overnights. Below we highlight the bright spots within these individual programs.

At the beginning of the Outdoor Credit Recovery program, students were mostly emerging in their social-emotional development. The post-survey report showed that students developed Core SEL at a greater rate than 75% of other similar groups using Hello Insight, which means this program was **performing above the national benchmark**.

- **100% (All)** of students in Outdoor Credit Recovery who were surveyed, made statistically significant gains in **Self-Management**.
- **100% (All)** of students in Outdoor Credit Recovery who were surveyed, said they would recommend this experience to other students seeking credit recovery.
- **100% (All)** of participants on three Extended Trips made statistically significant growth in **Outdoor SEL**.
- **100% (All)** of participants on six Extended Trips made statistically significant growth in **Core SEL**.

Evaluation results below show some of the bright spots of individual trips and programs as it relates to Outdoor SEL Capacities.

AGGREGATE & GROUP DATA	OUTDOORS SEL OVERALL		
	SEL BASELINE AT PRE (with a matching Post)		POST
	Emerging	Advanced	Succeeded
Youth Multi-Day Programs 2024 (Aggregate)	39%	61%	82%
Credit Recovery - A Day	82%	18%	76%
Extended Trips - Apostle Islands - Shriners	33%	67%	100%
Extended Trips - BWCA Basecamp - Park Center Hmong Boys Group	29%	71%	100%
Extended Trips - BWCA Expedition - Bolder Options	27%	75%	75%
Extended Trips - BWCA Paddle Adventure - Detroit Outdoors	0%	100%	100%
Extended Trips - BWCA Paddle Adventure - McGregor District	0%	100%	50%
Extended Trips - Voyageurs - Bois Forte	0%	100%	0%
Extended Trips - Yellowstone - Harding Earth Club	14%	86%	71%
Extended Trips - Yellowstone - Park Center Outdoor Recreation	25%	75%	75%

Provided by Hello Insight

Evaluation results below show some of the bright spots of individual trips and programs as they relate to Core SEL Capacities.

AGGREGATE & GROUP DATA	CORE SEL OVERALL		
	SEL BASELINE AT PRE (with a matching Post)		POST
	Emerging	Advanced	Succeeded
Youth Multi-Day Programs 2024 (Aggregate)	43%	57%	86%
Credit Recovery - A Day	82%	18%	71%
Extended Trips - Apostle Islands - Shriners	11%	89%	100%
Extended Trips - BWCA Basecamp - Park Center Hmong Boys Group	14%	86%	86%
Extended Trips - BWCA Expedition - Bolder Options	50%	50%	100%
Extended Trips - BWCA Paddle Adventure - Detroit Outdoors	40%	60%	100%
Extended Trips - BWCA Paddle Adventure - McGregor District	50%	50%	100%
Extended Trips - Voyageurs - Bois Forte	0%	100%	100%
Extended Trips - Yellowstone - Harding Earth Club	29%	71%	71%
Extended Trips - Yellowstone - Park Center Outdoor Recreation	25%	75%	100%

Provided by Hello Insight

Evaluation results below show year-over-year improvement of program implementation that led to the evaluation results.

YEAR TO YEAR COMPARISON	PYD IMPLEMENTATION SCORES		
	EXTENDED TRIPS 2022	EXTENDED TRIPS 2023	EXTENDED TRIPS 2024
Reflect on Outdoor Exploration	73	72	91
Foster Outdoor Exploration	71	73	92
Engage Authentically	98	79	95
Promote Peer Bonds	90	70	93
Expand Interests	79	62	89
Share Power	42	42	64
Challenge Growth	86	82	95
Manage Goals	54	54	70

Provided by Hello Insight

Supporting Qualitative Data

Students were asked about their connection to nature before and after their Wilderness Inquiry experience. Many students self-reported that their connections grew due to their Wilderness Inquiry experience. We share a few of their self-reflections from after the trip to emphasize their growth in Outdoor Social-Emotional Skills:

How would you describe your relationship with nature now?

- "I describe my relationship very well, now it made me realize how important it's to take care of it."
- "I love nature and nature loves me."
- "Nature is so good because it helps you with many things like when you have a connection with nature you feel better it helps you and your body and you mentally."
- "I feel relaxed and very calm when I'm outside, at peace."
- "Not very connected but I can say I have grown and seen the importance and connection that nature has over this past week. For example, the water gives you water and a thriving ecosystem."
- "Dope, it makes me wanna visit parks more, it strengthens my love of staring at trees and the sky!"
- **"I would say my relationship with nature is so much stronger thanks to this program."**
- **"Nature is like an older brother, it takes care of me."**
- "I feel so good being in touch with nature because it helps a lot with mental health. I really never like being outside, but now I enjoy looking at nature and listening to the birds sing or talk."
- "I think it's a lot better than when I started this program. I've started enjoying being in nature more."

Analysis and Conclusion

Wilderness Inquiry youth participants showed the most growth in Outdoors SEL, with all categories showing an 86% success rate in 1) Wellbeing in the Outdoors, 2) Connection to the Outdoors, and 3) Support for the Environment. Hello Insight reported they have not met another organization using Hello Insight that has had that high of scores in Outdoors SEL. This growth is attributed to Wilderness Inquiry using research-based best practices to help youth participants reflect on their outdoor experience and foster their interest in outdoor exploration.

Wilderness Inquiry youth participants also showed statistically significant growth in Self-Management (90%), Positive Identity (79%), and Social Skills (79%). This growth is attributed to Wilderness Inquiry using research-based best practices to help young people feel safe and supported while listening to and valuing their ideas. Students were given opportunities to work in small groups to solve problems. Lastly, Wilderness Inquiry staff expressed often to young people that they expect them to try hard and do their best, while encouraging them to work through difficult problems.

Wilderness Inquiry program impact has shown improvement year-over-year. We believe this is due to 1) Wilderness Inquiry has made tweaks to its programming based on the recommendations from Hello Insight 2) Wilderness Inquiry improved our training on SEL best practices; 3) Returning staff continue to grow their skills in best practices.

Upon analyzing post-survey results, we discovered that participants in Extended Trips all succeeded in maintaining or improving their SEL capacities, meeting the National Benchmark. Meanwhile, in Outdoor Credit Recovery, 75% of participants showed significant growth in their SEL capacities, surpassing the National Benchmark. **This indicates that youth with the most room for growth are likely to experience the most significant progress**, which aligns with the Equigenic Effect theory - as explained by Dr. Cathy Jordan, Consulting Research Director of the Children & Nature Network, Equigenic Effect is a term used in [the health] sector to refer to when nature benefits children negatively impacted by economic disadvantage even more than it benefits children from more advantaged backgrounds. So, although nature might be good for all children, it's especially good for those who might be at risk for poorer health, mental health, social or educational outcomes as a result of factors associated with limited financial resources. The implication is that equitable access to nature could, for example, help close educational achievement gaps or reduce health disparities" (2020).

Since 2022, Wilderness Inquiry has been evaluating its multi-day experiences using the Hello Insight Pre and Post survey tool. Hello Insight's report pairs evaluation insights with best practices, which ensures that programmatic strategies remain aligned with the latest research, ultimately fostering a more impactful learning environment for youth participants. The insights derived from the evaluation serve as a foundational resource, informing both the design and implementation of future training sessions aimed at improving the effectiveness of outdoor programming. Furthermore, the analysis of year-over-year results reveals a consistent pattern of program enhancement, particularly in the mastery of key experiences by outdoor leaders. This data-driven approach showcases the organization's commitment to evidence-based practices and highlights the positive impact that well-structured outdoor experiences can have on the social-emotional growth of young individuals. **By prioritizing continuous improvement and adapting strategies based on empirical findings, Wilderness Inquiry exemplifies a progressive model for educational and experiential programming in outdoor settings.**

Recommendations

From analyses of existing data in the Hello Insight system, the system can identify which practices are the most important for making Core and Outdoor SEL gains in young people, like those that participate in Wilderness Inquiry programs. Hello Insight ranks their recommendations by the potential for positive impact on Wilderness Inquiry's young people's Core and Outdoor SEL scores. Based on Wilderness Inquiry's young people's unique mix of capacities, Hello Insight recommends the following program experience improvements for Wilderness Inquiry's young people. While these evaluation results are specific to Wilderness Inquiry multi-day adventures, the recommendations that come from Hello Insight's report can and will be applied to all youth programming at Wilderness Inquiry, including single day Canoemobile programs.

Program Improvement

Program Facilitation

- *Reflect on Outdoor Exploration:* Create opportunities for young people to think about what they achieved and what was challenging during their outdoor experiences. Ask young people to identify achievements and challenges during the outdoor experience. Then ask them to describe the reasons behind their achievements and challenges, focusing on decision-making and steps.

- *Foster Outdoor Exploration:* Ask young people about what they find interesting or meaningful about the outdoors. Plan projects or activities based on their responses. This will promote deeper engagement.
- *Promote Peer Bonds:* Create opportunities for young people to work in small groups to solve problems. Step back to let young people grapple with difficult issues.
- *Engage Authentically:* Create a safe space for young people to share their stories and develop projects that value and build upon their lived experiences.

The following recommendations come from the Wilderness Inquiry's Evaluation Team's analysis.

- Provide more inquiry-based and student-led activities and outdoor experiences to hone in on sharing power and managing goals as youth progress through Wilderness Inquiry's Pyramid of Outdoor Engagement. Apply this pedagogy to all levels of the Pyramid of Outdoor Engagement.
- Provide scaffolded outdoor skill-building experiences that support youth at each level of the Pyramid of Outdoor Engagement. The importance of a positive emotional experience during the introductory activity will catalyze participants to choose the outdoors as an experience they pursue on their own.
- Expand Outdoor Credit Recovery model to Minnesota Department of Education and districts that have high rates of students attending credit recovery programs throughout the school year to continue to reach students who are mostly emerging in their social-emotional development.
- Provide deeper and continuous training on SEL best practices, while also providing shadow opportunities at any stage of career with Wilderness Inquiry.

Staff Training

1. Enhance training and continued education opportunities that will prepare Outdoor Leaders to effectively deliver on the key areas of improvement identified above.
2. Enhance facilitation tips and techniques for Outdoor Leaders to reference SEL best practices for each lesson or process/procedure they implement in programming.

Guide program participants into appropriate programs and settings

1. Work with the Minnesota Department of Education and school districts to adopt the outdoor credit recovery model, prioritizing schools and students that may benefit

the most. Students who show the greatest losses or delays from the COVID-19 pandemic have the most to gain from Wilderness Inquiry program interventions. Addressing the opportunity gap equitably means prioritizing urban schools, Title I schools, and districts performing below state academic standards.

2. Develop and implement Professional Development training for licensed and pre-service K-12 educators focused on building in nature-based learning modules and SEL best practices with their existing curricula.
3. Continue to provide opportunities for youth to progress through the Pyramid of Outdoor Engagement, recognizing that (particularly emerging) students who participate in introductory experiences are better prepared to glean the most impact from an extended camping trip.

Increase funding

Increase funding to keep program costs reasonable for the end-user.

1. Share results with current and potential funders, to increase funding for these impactful and meaningful youth programs.
2. Develop a storytelling initiative to build connection, understanding, and awareness and interest in outdoor access.

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