

Sounding Board



A publication of Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center Charter School Division

Oversight of Environmental Education

September 2026

As a charter school board member, you are accountable for many important responsibilities. Between balancing budgets, evaluating school leadership, and keeping up with state laws, oversight of the school's Environmental Education program (EE) can sometimes get lost in the shuffle and deprioritized at the board level. In fact, you may not be familiar with what environmental education is and why it's important.

What is Environmental Education?

The Osprey Wilds Environmental Learning Center defines environmental education as implementing values and strategies that create environmentally literate people, which means individuals who actively work to create healthy outcomes for themselves, their communities, and the earth.

- **The Ultimate Goal:** An environmentally literate population.
- **The True Test:** An individual's ability to work, both alone and together, toward sustaining a healthy natural environment.
- **How It Is Built:** Developing student awareness, knowledge, skills, and attitudes so that all people can live in balance with the earth.

Why is Environmental Education important?

An intentional, well-resourced EE program is actually one of your school's greatest assets. A landmark systematic [review by Stanford University](#) analyzed 119 peer-reviewed studies over a 20-year period and confirmed that environmental education isn't a distraction from core subjects, it's actually a catalyst for learning. The data shows that well-implemented environmental education directly sharpens critical thinking, raises motivation, and lowers student stress and anxiety. Regular exposure to nature-based learning functions as a self-regulation tool, helping students focus longer and significantly cutting down on classroom disruptions.

Osprey Wilds (OW) holds specific expectations for the implementation of school environmental education programs. When you understand the specific criteria your school is held accountable to, you can use these frameworks as a strategic roadmap to oversee a strong EE program that drives student success.

The Dual Framework: Student Outcomes & Operations Compliance

To facilitate effective oversight, board members need more than updates on activities, board members should be continually referencing the frameworks and criteria OW uses to evaluate the environmental program. Performance is evaluated across two distinct areas, both of which heavily inform charter renewal decisions:

1. Student Outcomes: Exhibit H & The Environmental Literacy Plan

Your charter contract contains a legally binding document called Exhibit H. This exhibit outlines specific long-term goals for student learning across five performance indicators: *Awareness, Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills, and Action*. These five indicators are the same for each school in OW's portfolio; together these indicators represent key ingredients that develop student environmental literacy.

- **The System:** Every school must design an annual Environmental Literacy Plan (ELP) and submit it to Osprey Wilds for approval by September 1 each year. This plan details the specific lessons and classroom content-based measures used to evaluate whether students are hitting the targets set in Exhibit H.
- **The Timeline:** Data from these classroom measures must be finalized and reported to Osprey Wilds by June 30 each year to determine your school's annual EE performance framework rating.

2. Program Inputs: Operations Performance Framework

Beyond student outcomes, Osprey Wilds also evaluates schools on whether environmental education is structurally integrated into the school's daily operations, governance, and compliance schedules. A school's Operations Evaluation also heavily informs charter renewal decisions. Within that evaluation, there are key indicators tied to Environmental Literacy that the board should monitor:

- **Mission & Vision (Indicator 1.1):** While a school is not required to have EE in its core mission statement, OW looks at whether leadership adapts environmental education in service of its unique mission, vision, and community needs. In practice, the board might be asking how EE is relevant to the specific students in your school and community or how EE is helping the school meet its mission.
- **Professional Development (Indicator 1.5):** Teachers cannot lead EE lessons without support. Schools must provide evidence of training designed to build staff capacity to increase students' environmental literacy.
- **Educational Program Integration (Operations Indicator 1.7):** OW reviews the school's ELP and evaluates if the school employs EE as a strategy for teaching and learning within its science curriculum *and at least one other discipline* (such as language arts, history, or physical education).
- **Sustainable Operations (Indicator 3.3):** A school that effectively teaches environmental stewardship should reflect those values in its operations and purchasing. OW looks for observable operational commitments to environmental sustainability in areas like facilities (energy reduction), food services (waste reduction/composting), and schoolyard spaces (native plantings/outdoor classrooms).

Expectations for Board Oversight of EE

Osprey Wilds has contractual expectations for every charter board to ensure strong fiscal resourcing, disciplined data tracking, and management accountability:

- **Review Progress at Least 4x Per Year (Operations Indicator 2.2):** The board must formally review the school's performance related to its contractual EE goals (Exhibit H) and its Environmental Literacy Plan (ELP) *at least four times a year, per OW's contract with the school*. These updates should go beyond stating the completion of an activity ("students collected trash from the school grounds") and be explicitly tied to the goals in Exhibit H and recorded as such in board minutes. An example of what this might look like in meeting minutes is included below. Additional examples are discussed in the [February 2026 EE Update](#):

EE Coordinator Update (Exhibit H Progress Monitoring): So far this year, our school has completed 6/10 activities in our ELP. We have met our target for 5 of them. Looking at the ELP in the board packet, you can see that we are on track to Meet Standard in 3 of 5 indicator areas of Exhibit H based on the data we have collected. We are working with staff to ensure data is collected for the remaining activities in accordance with our goals.

- **Evaluate Leadership on EE Outcomes (Operations Indicator 2.3):** Management accountability requires the board to evaluate the school leader on Exhibit H goals as part of the leader's formal annual performance evaluation. The director's evaluation must actively measure leadership performance in relation to OW contractual academic *and* environmental education goals.
- **Prioritize Fiscal Resourcing (Operations Indicator 2.4):** The board must demonstrate that it allocates appropriate financial, human, and organizational resources to achieve its EE goals. This might look like funding a stipend for the EE Coordinator, a line in the budget for environmental field trips, or funds for specific curricula.
- **Oversee Sustainable Campus Operations (Indicator 3.3):** The board is responsible for supporting and monitoring school leadership as they operationalize the school's environmental commitment. Operational decisions regarding facility policies, campus waste reduction efforts, or physical school grounds adjustments (like a garden or outdoor classroom) should demonstrate an observable commitment to environmental sustainability.

Funding the Vision: Maximizing Title IV, Part A Dollars

One of the most immediate ways a board can support the school's EE resources, without straining the general fund, is to leverage federal funding streams. Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Title IV-Part A (Student Support and Academic Enrichment) explicitly identifies environmental education as an allowable expense under the "Well-Rounded Educational Opportunities" content area.

Every qualifying charter school receives a statutory minimum allocation of \$10,000 for Title IV-Part A annually. Boards should consider using some of these dollars for environmental education, keeping a few critical compliance guardrails in mind:

- **The \$30,000 Threshold:**
 - If your school receives *less than* \$30,000 in Title IV-A funds, you have total flexibility to spend 100% of it on well-rounded subjects like EE.
 - If your allocation is \$30,000 *or greater*, federal law dictates that the school must conduct a formal needs assessment and spend a minimum of 20% on well-rounded education (EE).
- **Guard Against Transfers:** Because federal law allows school leadership to transfer Title IV-A allocations into other title programs (like Title I or Title II), the board plays a critical role during the budget-approval process to ensure these dollars are intentionally preserved and earmarked specifically for the school's EE initiatives.
- **Supplement, Not Supplant:** Title IV-A funds must be used to expand or enhance your EE program; they cannot be used to replace existing state or local funding that was already paying for regular core science materials or pre-existing staff salaries.

Bringing the Vision to Life

Ultimately, Osprey Wilds builds these components into its frameworks because of a deep belief in its own organizational vision: fostering a healthy planet where all people live in balance with the earth.

While Osprey Wilds provides the blueprint, your school's specific, customized EE goals are located in Exhibit H of your charter contract. Because environmental education is a cornerstone of the Osprey Wilds contract, effective boards look forward to regular, data-driven EE updates and encourage their school to adapt EE in service of the school's specific students, mission, and context.

Understanding the expectations of your school's EE program is a core duty that protects your school's charter standing. By leveraging available federal funding with disciplined, quarterly data tracking, and mission-aligned EE programming, your board can meet the authorizer's standards, support your teachers, and unlock an incredible educational asset that helps your students thrive.