



## **Wilderness Inquiry Youth Evaluation External Report 2023**

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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 wellbeing, 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; 2) wellbeing in the outdoors; 3) connection to the outdoors; 4) support for the environment; 5) social skills; and 6) positive identity.

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## Introduction

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

		
<b>Improve Program Implementation</b>	<b>Guide program participants to appropriate programs and settings</b>	<b>Increase program funding</b>
<i>Evaluation results will be reviewed and shared with staff to make ongoing and long-term programmatic changes.</i>	<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>	<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>

### 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.

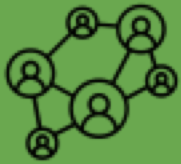



Through the medium of outdoor adventure travel, we inspire personal growth, enhanced awareness of the environment, and community integration. Wilderness Inquiry's adventures encourage people to open themselves to new possibilities and opportunities. We evaluated three of Wilderness Inquiry's youth programs 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.

2. 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.

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

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. There is growing evidence showing 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 a 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 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 2023 youth programming season (June-August), Wilderness Inquiry's evaluation tool assessed the SEL skills of 61 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 21% Asian, 21% Black or African American, 21% Latino(a)(x) 17% Two or more races, 17% White, 3% Some other race.
- The **Gender** of young people who participated in Wilderness Inquiry's program is 43% Male, 32% Female, 18% Chose Not to Describe, and 7% Chose to Describe.
- The **Grade** of young people who participated in Wilderness Inquiry's program were 100% High Schoolers.
- The **Age** of young people who participated in Wilderness Inquiry's program are 50% 16-17 years old, 50% 14-15 years old.

### ***Key Findings***

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*

#### Core SEL

All (100%) young people in the program showed meaningful effect size gains in one or more SEL outcomes, almost all (93%) grew in two or more, and almost all (90%) grew in three or more SEL outcome areas.

## Benchmark Finding

At pre, this program consisted of about an even mix of emerging and advanced 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 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 (90%) 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 (69%) 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 (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 (76%) 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).

Most (97%) 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 outdoors settings. 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.

### Experience Findings

Many (90%) of the young people in this program reported that Wilderness Inquiry expressed often that they expect young people to try hard and do their best while working through difficult problems. 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).

Many (83%) young people reported that they felt Wilderness Inquiry staff helped them feel safe and supported by consistently and purposefully applying their recommendations. 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.

## 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 partially due because young people experienced the research best practices of helping youth reflect on their outdoor exploration and help them to foster 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 partially due because young people experienced the research best practices of helping 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.

In addition to Wilderness Inquiry's results, Hello Insight conducted a study that was published in 2023. Hello Insight's study looked at data from 55 youth-serving organizations, including Wilderness Inquiry, from 2018 to 2022. They compared young people in outdoor programs to young people in other out-of-school programs. Their findings were 1) Young people in outdoor programs develop SEL capacities; 2) Young people develop SEL capacities at a higher rate in outdoor programs than in non-outdoor programs; 3) Young people in outdoor programs experience more Engage Authentically and Promote Peer Bonds practices than in non-outdoor programs (Catalan Molina, D., 2023). Hello Insight's findings suggest that **young people in outdoor programs show a significantly larger growth in Social Skills, Academic Self-Efficacy, and Self-Management** than their peers in non-outdoor programs. This aligns with the findings from Wilderness Inquiry specific programs evaluated by Hello Insight.

## 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

1. *Foundational SEL*: Focus on improving how we facilitate *Promote Peer Bonds* by creating opportunities for young people to work together and help one another.
2. *Outdoor Exploration*: Identify ways to intentionally *Reflect on Outdoor Exploration* by creating opportunities for young people to reflect on what they hear, see, and feel in the outdoors, and help young people connect what they learn outdoors with their everyday life.
3. *Outdoor Exploration*: Focus on improving how we facilitate *Reflect on Outdoor Exploration* by helping young people connect what they learn outdoors with their everyday lives; create opportunities for young people to think about what they achieved and what was challenging during their outdoor experiences.
4. *Outdoor Exploration*: Focus on improving how we facilitate *Foster Outdoor Exploration* by finding ways to encourage young people to express their thoughts and feelings about their outdoor experiences and support them as they encounter and take on outdoor challenges.

#### 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.



Could include welcome circle, closing circle, best practices to facilitate safety talks, introductions, etc.

### ***Guide program participants into appropriate programs and settings***

1. Share results with St. Paul and Minneapolis School Districts. Discuss if and how Wilderness Inquiry programs are supporting their goals and students.
2. Share results with future school districts as programs scale.
3. Develop and enhance outdoor recreation and education programming that centers SEL learning to effectively engage participants in a progression of nature-based experiences.
4. Develop and implement Professional Development training for educators to learn how to build in nature-based learning modules and SEL best practices with their existing curricula.
5. Prioritize schools and students that may benefit the most. Students that show the greatest losses or delays from the pandemic may have the most to gain from Wilderness Inquiry program interventions. Addressing the opportunity gap in an equitable manner means prioritizing schools that serve students with the highest needs or may have the least green space / tree cover, least access to safe parks, highest number of students on financial assistance, and lowest performance on academic outcomes.

### ***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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