



Riverbend Environmental Education Center Strategic Plan 2023 - 2025

Mission

Riverbend Environmental Education Center connects people to nature, equitably advancing environmental literacy through outdoor STEM education and free play in nature, while empowering children and adults to take action to conserve Earth's resources.

Vision

Riverbend will be known as the model nature-based STEM teaching partner for schools, trusted resource for parents working to protect the earth our children will inherit, and a change agent propelling Pennsylvanians towards a just future where all people live in harmony with nature.

Values

Excellence in environmental education for all
Equitable access to nature, which leads to more equitable educational outcomes
Personal well-being, fostered by connecting people to nature
Environmental stewardship of the land we own
Responsible governance and management
Fun! Our work is recreational and creative

DEI Statement

As environmental educators, we know that natural environments with greater biodiversity are stronger and more resilient. In turn, we aspire to be an ever more diverse, inclusive, and equitable organization. We commit to building a community where both our staff members and the students, educators, and families we serve, feel valued, respected, and engaged.
Full statement and DEI Plan can be found on Riverbend's website.

Strategic Initiatives Committee, December 2022:

Simon Herriott, Committee Chairperson
Bryan Franey, Board of Directors Chairperson
Sarah Collier
Pat Ryan
Keith Pryor
Dave Copas
Erin Reilly, Executive Director



Summary

Riverbend's FY 23-25 strategic plan is the product of this singular moment, when the end of the COVID-19 pandemic has reaffirmed children's fundamental need for hands-on learning led by skilled educators, and the world's fundamental need to rapidly shift to more ecologically sustainable ways of living. Coming out of the pandemic, education losses for elementary school children are significant, and substantially higher in the low-income neighborhoods where Riverbend directs nearly half its time and service. Children and adults are experiencing the kind of mental and emotional health problems that time in nature can alleviate. Meanwhile, the world is more focused on the imperative need to reduce carbon emissions, preserve forests, and protect biodiversity.

Against this backdrop, Riverbend offers programming that offers multiple solutions to pressing problems. Riverbend puts nature back into childhood by teaching outdoors. We provide children with pathways to STEM careers by partnering with schools to improve STEM education. We empower children and their grownups to take action, by supporting informed parenting in the age of climate change, developing teachers' environmental literacy teaching skills, and role modeling for our Lower Merion community a shift to more sustainable living.

Additionally, our Board and staff have a fierce commitment to driving equitable education outcomes for ALL children. We believe that equitable access to nature education is critical to righting environmental injustices and recognize that climate change impacts people across socioeconomic and racial groups.

Riverbend proudly operates four core education programs, all of which reach a diverse cross-section of students. The Board and staff will pursue the following opportunities to expand and transform these programs:

1. Summer camp: expand, plus increase scholarships from 2 to 75 annually.
2. Field Trips: Fully rebuild to serve 12,000 students.
3. Community of Practice: sustain and improve, to deepen impact for 500 low-income students, mostly in Philadelphia.
4. Preserve events: do our part to address climate change by adding climate topics to public education events and adding a focus on sustainability to our operations.



Where We Are Now

For nearly 50 years, Riverbend has been a trusted source for environmental literacy, sustaining superior education programs and pioneering exciting innovative education tools like Aquaponics. Additionally, Riverbend has been evolving toward taking a more active stance on various climate issues for some time but has not formally incorporated this work. Simply by virtue of being a nature center, we have a duty to talk to parents and children about our region's most pressing environmental challenges. To maintain a credibly caring relationship with our children, we must show them that we are also caring for the earth they will inherit.

Diversity and Inclusion has come to the forefront of our work. We appreciate that our school program partners are diverse in every way. Our success in achieving equitable education outcomes for children depends upon mutual trust between Riverbend and its school partners. Thus, we will foster a culture of listening and openness in our dealings with all education stakeholders. We will carry out the actions outlined in our first DEI plan, adopted in December 2022. Central to these actions is that over the course of the next three years, Riverbend will seek ways of honoring the indigenous history of our land.

We must sustain our preserve's essential function as an outdoor classroom, the highest and best use for our 30-acre property. We will prioritize upgrades that maintain the preserve's character as a unique destination for our donors, Habitat Interns, Teen volunteers and field trip students. Riverbend needs to catch up on 3 years of deferred maintenance to the Barn, Farmhouse and trails.



Additionally, there is a need to protect our brand as we pursue offsite expansion. In 2018, the Brownstein Group helped Riverbend define its brand identity as being an “expert”, “forward-thinking,” and “engaging” organization. As a result, we subtly evolved our logo from a rustic look to a sleeker, one-color logo. Some of our current signage still reflects the old logo, and our wood trail signage has mostly disintegrated. We need updated signage and a brand guide to bring consistency to our communications.

Rather than pursuing our strategic goals incrementally over the next decade, we will tap into this moment of environmental urgency, and leverage the 50th Anniversary to raise funds needed for preserve repairs, signage, scholarships, education programs, and manpower. The first six months will be spent pricing out our must-do's, and hiring a campaign consultant who will help us determine the amount we can expect to raise. As Riverbend stands at the crossroads between our first five decades and our next five decades of nature education, the 50th Anniversary campaign will propel us toward the bright future we envision for our children and the Earth.

Priorities and Objectives

Our Strategic Priorities | Based on the SWOT analysis

1. Rebuild and expand our core education programs
2. Advance our fierce commitment to equitable education
3. Add a focus on environmental sustainability to everything we do

Our SMART objectives | Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-bound

1. **Leverage 50th Anniversary to ensure the Preserve remains a significant field trip and family destination.**
 - Bundle all deferred maintenance into one discreet "preserve upgrade" project to be completed by June 2025.
 - Strengthen our brand through signage on preserve and building a brand guide to improve marketing of offsite camps.
 - Conduct a 50th Anniversary Campaign: Leadership Phase-2023, Public Phase-2024, Remodel complete-2025.
 - Design a 50th Anniversary Campaign budget that would raise an additional \$500,000 to \$1 million over 3 years.
2. **Increase Annual Operating Revenue by 5-10% per year for the next 3 years, to advance the long-term viability of Riverbend.**
 - Board of Directors will drive growth by hosting popular public events and leading committee initiatives that

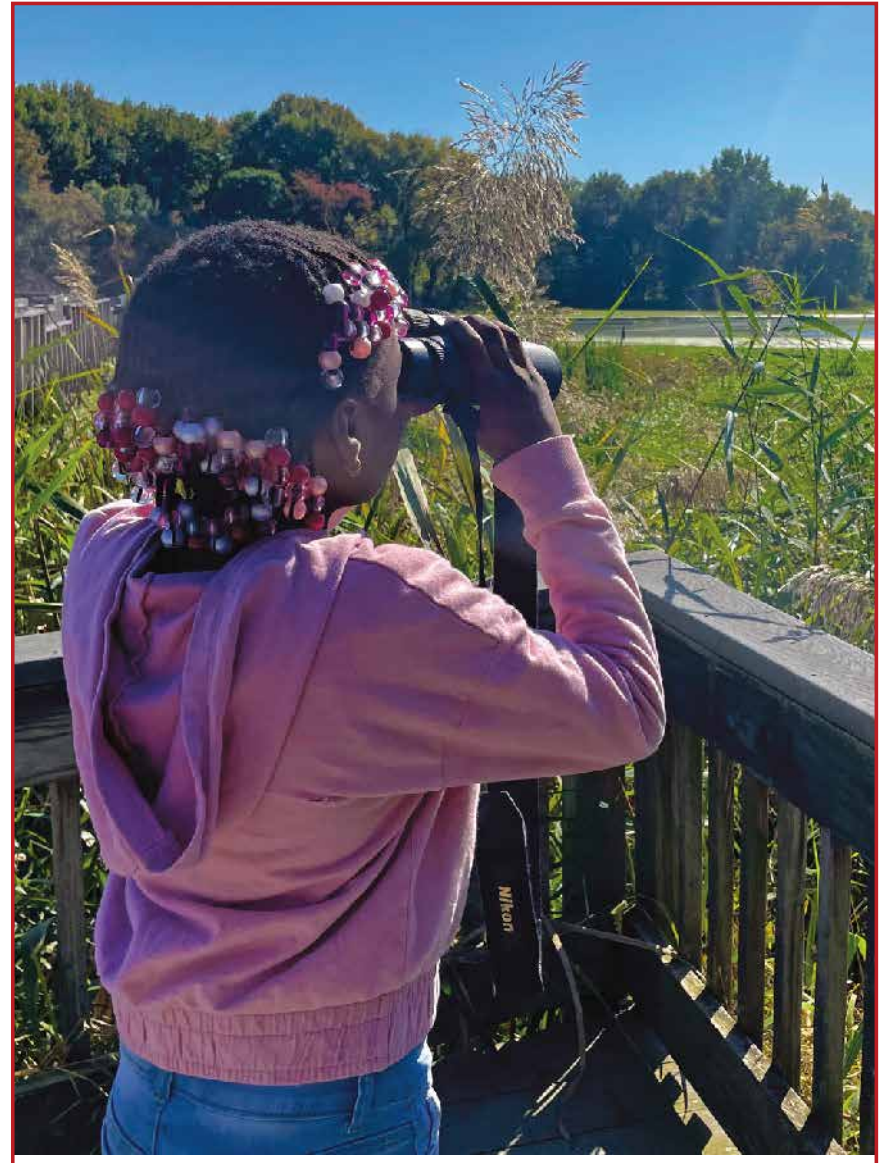
- are fun and meaningful.
- Earned revenue: fully rebuild field trips, and expand Summer Camp by adding up to 3 offsite locations.
- Contributed revenue: build the "camp parent-to-donor pipeline" by increasing camp parents' foot traffic at our Preserve via events (where they get to enjoy the Riverbend experience alongside their children.) Increase from 7 to 10, and bring back Farm To Table.

3. **Deepen our impact on and service to low income children to ensure 40% of our education service benefits low income children.**
 - Sustain Community of Practice by investing in teacher stipends and longitudinal evaluation in order to pursue larger grants.
 - Maintain two Fellowship positions on staff to maintain quality in Nature Based STEM program (Norristown, Upper Darby).
 - Offer donors the chance to fund camp scholarships in Gladwyne and offsite, increasing to from 2 to 75 per year by 2025.
4. **In order to "live what we teach" and "walk the walk," on climate change, we will lead the shift to more sustainable living.**
 - Offer more weekend events for adults (camp parents and empty nesters) that promote an exchange of ideas and inspire environmental action in a friendly and welcoming atmosphere.
 - Add or increase sustainability topics in our curricula in every program we operate, by using existing climate education best practices.

Priorities and Objectives Continued

- Tweak operating processes and investigate renewable energy that would lessen Riverbend's carbon footprint over the next 5 years.
5. **Solve the pre-pandemic staff turnover/burnout problem by investing in staff.**
- Measure progress towards our DEI plan goals every quarter, and invest \$10,000 per year towards achieving DEI goals.
 - Ensure each staffer can access up to \$500 every one to three years for professional development.
 - Create overlap between school year staff and Summer Camp staff by enshrining the Fellowship program and involving school year staff in Camp Counselor training.
 - Consider adding 1 - 2 staff or consulting positions to ensure we accomplish fundraising and facilities upgrades.

Riverbend envisions a world where all children possess environmental literacy, to both advance their personal well-being and to safeguard the natural resources that sustain us all.



Strategic Planning Process Findings

Internal Stakeholders

Name:	Board	Staff	Grant Funders
<p>Why do they believe in us?</p>	<p>We are making children and the planet healthier and more peaceful.</p>	<p>We are making children and the planet healthier.</p>	<p>We educate low income children.</p> <p>Advancing STEM education in the right time in a kid's life.</p> <p>Our programs are data-tested and we can show evidence of quality.</p>
<p>What do we need them for?</p>	<p>Expertise, vision-setting, social capital, intellectual resources, problem-solving.</p> <p>Sense of team accomplishment trickles down.</p> <p>33% of donated revenue annually.</p>	<p>Execution Innovation</p>	<p>Underwrite ACCESS programs</p> <p>Capital dollars for preserve improvements</p>
<p>Why do we believe in them?</p>	<p>They show up, they participate, they bring their TTT.</p>	<p>They keep innovating improvements. Moral clarity</p>	<p>They have shown their willingness to be flexible partners. They trust us.</p>

Strategic Planning Process Findings

External Stakeholders

Name:	Teachers / Principals / STEM Admins	LMT Families and Camp Parents	Parents who donate / Adult learners
Why do they believe in us?	<p>High quality field trip</p> <p>Breath of fresh air for their curriculum; energizing for teachers</p> <p>Our strong reputation</p> <p>Title I schools can count on us</p>	<p>We offer less structure</p> <p>We offer outdoor play, which is rare</p> <p>"We are their place."</p> <p>They feel a sense of belonging attached to the property.</p>	<p>They love that their kids feel free and safe at Riverbend, and come home dirty and wet. For adult learners, they have fond memories of their kids' childhoods at Riverbend. Both groups want to "pay it forward" to low income children. They are trusting us to make a better future world.</p>
What do we need them for?	<p>Revenue</p> <p>They are the gatekeepers to students.</p> <p>We need their input on curriculum.</p> <p>When teachers partner with us in COP, it allows us to make a deep, long-lasting impact</p>	<p>Camp tuition and other earned revenue</p> <p>They trust us to educate their children</p> <p>Volunteers at our events</p> <p>WOM marketing, the best kind!</p>	<p>Gen Ops (support for preserve)</p> <p>Underwrite programs for low-income students</p> <p>Mainstreaming sustainability practices</p> <p>Early adopters, trailblazers</p>
Why do we believe in them?	<p>They truly want to take children outdoors. They have deep knowledge of what their students need</p>	<p>We think they can lead the shift locally to a more sustainable way of life.</p> <p>They are ambassadors for us.</p>	<p>Values alignment: they love nature and low-income children.</p> <p>They trust us enough to put the care of their funds and children in our hands.</p>

SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<p>DEI Plan</p> <p>Strong, 14-person Board that can fundraise!</p> <p>Gladwyne zip code</p> <p>Strong staff, morale is good</p> <p>Farmhouse gives us more programming space</p>	<p>Understaffed, high education staff turnover in the past</p> <p>Running out of space in our buildings</p>
Opportunities	Threats
<p>50th Anniversary</p> <p>LMT new focus on environmental sustainability, many potential partners for education programming for adults</p> <p>Chance to bundle all our deferred maintenance into one big renovation project</p> <p>Chance to bring back adult events with a deeper emphasis on sustainable living</p> <p>300 LMT families on our summer camp wait list</p>	<p>Ongoing Barn and other facility repair needs; property looks tired</p> <p>Possibility Cupola will leave, loss of \$55k annually</p> <p>Rising labor costs may neutralize summer camp revenue gains</p> <p>Possibility we have not yet solved our past staff turnover problem</p> <p>Recession, threat to fundraising</p>



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