



**DIRTY. TIRED.
HAPPY.
(AND THRIVING.)**



AUGUST 2023

To Our Beloved Community

Much has changed since Dave Cook and Wayne Poole founded Schoolhouse of Wonder in 1989. Yet their founding inspirations remain as relevant as ever. Perhaps even more so.

In the last three decades, we have learned just how critical access to the outdoors, opportunities for adventure, and nature-based play are for children's social-emotional learning. We've designed programs that help children develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.¹

Still, much remains to be done. Specifically, while the children who do access our programs benefit enormously, there are many, many more who never get the chance. Our strategic plan is intentionally designed to change that reality. Over the next five years, we will leverage our history, experience, and expertise in pursuit of four crucially important goals:

- **Increasing diversity**
- **Sharing The Schoolhouse Way**
- **Systematizing for stable operations**
- **Broadening funding streams**

The goal of this plan is simple, yet ambitious: We want to be sure that every child in our service area has the opportunity to experience the magic of Schoolhouse.

Whether it's engaging in supervised risks; building self-efficacy and confidence; or experiencing adventures, a sense of wonder, and the joy of discovery, we already know that accessing our programs can change young lives. We just want to change more of them.

Internally and externally, achieving this vision will require us to be brave. Yet, as we know from the programming we run, brave adventures require careful preparation. So alongside a call to adventure, this plan also makes the case for strategic and intentional investment in the systems and structures that will make that adventure possible.

Thank you to everyone in our community for contributing to this plan. That especially includes the Schoolhouse staff, current and former Board of Directors, camp parents, and community partners. We are proud of the important work Schoolhouse of Wonder does, and we look forward to what we will accomplish together in the future.

We're honored to be on this adventure with you,

Robin Murchison, Board Chair
Wendy Tonker, CEO

¹ Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). Fundamentals of SEL. casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/



WHO WE ARE



A Catalyst for Adventure

For more than three decades, our vision of open-hearted children, who become open-minded adults, has inspired everything we do. It's been the core engine driving our outdoor day camps, field trips, and leadership training for children and teens across Durham, Wake, and Orange Counties in North Carolina.

Founded as a natural history cooperative by Dave Cook and Wayne Poole in 1989, we've grown to serve more than 65,000 children through five locations and 1,765 camps and field trips.

Schoolhouse of Wonder celebrates individuality: We support and celebrate our diverse community members of all races, genders, ages, religions, and identities, and we are committed to creating an inclusive environment where everyone feels welcome to share their authentic selves. Through our programs, children develop their sense of self while increasing their confidence, independence, decision-making, and problem-solving skills, as well as their empathy toward others.

OUR MISSION

Schoolhouse of Wonder creates **kind, curious,** and **confident kids** through nature-based outdoor adventures.

OUR VALUES

- We model and teach self-awareness and empathy.
- We celebrate individuality; different is just different.
- Everyone deserves to be witnessed, heard, and respected.
- In nature, we're all students.
- Life should be filled with adventures and a sense of wonder.
- We send every kid home dirty, tired, and happy.

WHAT WE DO



We Develop Kind, Curious, and Confident Kids.

We don't dictate answers or prescribe solutions. Instead, we view our work with kids through the lens of mentoring.

That means we support children as they find the answers they need on their own. We guide. We inform. We listen. We empathize. And we teach our staff to stay positive, proactive, and curious about what each child is trying to communicate, both through their words and with their behavior.

Wellness—physical, emotional, social—is so important to children's development. That's why social-emotional learning is at the heart of Schoolhouse of Wonder's programs. We connect with each child on an emotional level through a combination of listening, relating, and teaching. Our goal is to proactively identify and resolve safety and behavior management issues, not merely react to situations after they occur. We also stay actively engaged with campers, whether that's splashing in the river, hiding in the leaves, or playing the games they play.

Our superpower is outdoor adventurous play—from throwing a tomahawk to whittling with a vegetable peeler or pocket knife, and from jumping off a rock into the river to building a fort in the woods.

Studies have shown that outdoor adventurous play helps prevent anxiety, benefits children's mood, and improves their long-term mental health.² Supervised risk-taking is an essential part of growing up. Campers' sense of risk and opportunities to navigate challenges can be valuable experiences when offered in a safe environment with skilled mentors like our talented counselors and staff. That's what we call The Schoolhouse Way.



² Dodd, H.F., Nesbit, R.J. & FitzGibbon, L. [Child's Play: Examining the Association Between Time Spent Playing and Child Mental Health](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-022-01363-2). *Child Psychiatry Hum Dev* (2022). doi.org/10.1007/s10578-022-01363-2

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE



Bringing The Wonder to Scale.

In support of our mission to develop kind, curious, and confident kids through nature-based outdoor adventures, our Five Year Plan will focus on four interrelated goals.

Independently, each goal informs our daily priorities and moves us toward our vision of open-hearted children becoming open-minded adults. Combined, the goals drive a virtuous cycle of activities that ensure that the future of Schoolhouse of Wonder is as wondrous as ever.



This camp is exactly what I want my kids doing, and these people are exactly the people I want my kids hanging out with.

I could not possibly be any happier with the SoW. "

–J.F.

GOAL #1: INCREASING DIVERSITY

Our commitment to diversity must come first, in this plan and every day. We understand that part of this goal is learning how to embed diversity in every conversation, every activity, and every strategy, which requires practice and work with experts. Within increasing diversity, objectives and activities include:

- 1.1 Expand the board to include a broader and more diverse range of leaders.
- 1.2 Open one to three new locations in the Carolinas by meeting Wake County demand and simultaneously expanding the diversity of participants.
- 1.3 Offer multiple programs in a single location by expanding offerings and expanding relationships with our land partners (see also Goal #3).
- 1.4 Offer day camps in urban community locations in concert with new community partners.
- 1.5 Offer field trips to a mix of schools in the Carolinas.

GOAL #2: **SHARING THE SCHOOLHOUSE WAY**

For over 30 years, we have developed extensive research- and experience-based knowledge about fostering wellness and social-emotional learning (SEL). We learn more daily about what makes Schoolhouse wondrous. Sharing The Schoolhouse Way allows our ideas to spread, and simultaneously encourages us to clarify our philosophy, materials, and approaches.

Within sharing The Schoolhouse Way, sample objectives or activities include:

- 2.1** Further develop the Schoolhouse curriculum, “The Schoolhouse Way,” anchored in multi-disciplinary best practices, research, and results.
- 2.2** Foster The Schoolhouse Way in others via training and franchises.
- 2.3** Provide volunteer opportunities, such as leading field trips or helping land partners with projects.



GOAL #3: **SYSTEMATIZING FOR STABLE OPERATIONS**

Related to the first two goals, and absolutely critical to everything, we know that we must systematize and add ease to our day-to-day and year-round work. Within systematizing for stable operations, sample objectives or activities include:

- 3.1** Strengthen systems and workflows for hiring, training, programming, accounting, etc.
- 3.2** Stabilize and grow relationships with current land partners.
- 3.3** Tailor and improve marketing.

GOAL #4: **BROADENING FUNDING STREAMS**

Completing our inter-related goals, which we tend to think about as growth rings on a tree, we are ready to broaden our funding streams. Although camp income is critical, we have to be smarter about our income. Within broadening funding streams, sample objectives or activities include:

- 4.1** Fund and offer more scholarships.
- 4.2** Begin a fundraising campaign, with a well-being focus that funds both scholarships and the franchising of The Schoolhouse Way.
- 4.3** Offer The Schoolhouse Way to additional communities via corporate leadership team building, consulting, or other training.

A PATH FORWARD

Building the Foundations for Adventure.

Schoolhouse of Wonder has earned our position as one of the longest-operating and most beloved camp programs in the Triangle. We now find ourselves on the cusp of a major inflection point. As our community grows, and our reputation spreads, we have the potential to reach many more campers, and to transform many more lives with our unique approach to social-emotional learning.

At the end of this Five Year Plan, our goal is to have:

- 1 **A diverse Schoolhouse community**, accessible to all in our region of service
- 2 **A network of learning** that spreads our philosophy, our approach, and our resources well beyond our own programs, or the boundaries of the Triangle
- 3 **Efficient and stable operational systems** that serve as a foundation for our ability to scale
- 4 **And a funding model that allows us to grow responsibly**, while also maintaining affordability for all who are interested in experiencing Schoolhouse

Grasping that opportunity requires a leap of faith from all of us. But a leap of faith comes more readily when you've made the preparations to take that leap with confidence. (To put it another way, it's easier to whittle with a knife once you have practiced with a potato peeler first.)

We would be lying if we said we know exactly how this will play out. The future just doesn't work that way. But that's why our plan is deliberately designed to be iterative and adaptable. As new information becomes available, and new opportunities or challenges present themselves, we will learn, we will grow, and we will navigate the adventure together.

That, after all, is The Schoolhouse Way.



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