

Maine Project Learning Tree Strategic Plan 2014-2017



Sponsored by: Maine TREE Foundation



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1. PROJECT LEARNING TREE OVERVIEW

(From the Project Learning Tree National Office)

“Our nation has a growing reliance on the benefits private forests provide. Yet as we ramp up our efforts to protect family forests today, it will not mean much if we lose them tomorrow - which is why the growing disconnect between children and nature is a grave threat to America’s natural heritage.”

“Today, children are spending half as much time outdoors as they did 20 years ago. We are at risk of losing an entire generation’s appreciation for how nature works and what it needs to remain healthy and productive, even as we face enormous environmental challenges that will impact the quality of their lives.

The American Forest Foundation’s (AFF) work is about the future. What type of country will we be 20, 50, 100 years from now? Will our citizens understand the natural world and feel connected to it? Will they know the benefits the environment provides and their responsibility for it? Will they have the skills required to address complex environmental challenges? Will the next generation be prepared for the future they will inherit? Will youth today be stewards of our forests tomorrow?

To support its fundamental long-term goals, one of AFF’s strategic priorities is to ensure decision-makers and educators understand and value America’s woodlands. Through Project Learning Tree® (PLT), the environmental education program of AFF, we are developing the critical-thinking, problem-solving, and effective decision-making skills the next generation needs to protect our forests and natural resources.”

“As the education arm of the American Forest Foundation, PLT uses forests and trees as windows on the world to increase students’ understanding of our environment; stimulate students’ critical and creative thinking; develop students’ abilities to make informed decisions on environmental issues; and instill in students the commitment to take responsible action on behalf of the environment. Through this work, PLT helps AFF achieve its mission of increasing public awareness and understanding of the role that forests and the environment play in our lives, building the skills and commitment needed to conserve and sustain forests and the environment, and developing and advancing programs that support conservation and environmental education.

Started in 1976, Project Learning Tree has been the cornerstone for Environmental Education (EE) and is one of the most widely used EE programs in the United States and abroad. PLT continues to set the standard for excellence in EE, and a number of other successful national providers in the field (Project WILD and Project WET, to name just two) have closely patterned their educational resources, training models, and program delivery systems on the models that PLT originally pioneered.

The PLT Program encompasses three essential cross-supporting elements:

1) High Quality Curriculum Materials - PLT's materials are peer-reviewed, award winning, and meet state and national education standards. The curriculum materials provide the tools educators need to bring the environment into the classroom and their students into the environment. Because of the rigor with which PLT develops its curriculum materials and their correlation to state academic standards they are highly valued and used by teachers across the US with their students.

2) Professional Development Delivery Model - More than 500,000 educators have participated in PLT's Professional Development programs (required to get materials), where they gain a keen understanding of how to use the PLT materials, resulting in classroom application. Through this professional development, the PLT Program has reached over 75 million students in the United States and abroad.

3) Implementation via State Partnership Network - PLT implements Professional Development at the state and local levels through a network of over 80 PLT State Coordinators who work for PLT State Sponsoring Organizations. State Coordinators align the materials with local standards and work with a grassroots network of workshop facilitators to train over 30,000 educators annually in PLT. By leveraging the capacity of its respective state networks, PLT reaches and teaches many more educators than it ever could on its own - and in ways that meet local needs.”¹

¹ Project Learning Tree Strategic Plan 2012-2015

2. PLT State Coordinator Position and Responsibilities Defined

The following from National PLT guides delivery of the program and defines the relationship between state programs and the National PLT office in Washington DC.

Background

For a state PLT program to exist, at least one sponsoring organization is responsible for administering the program and disseminating PLT materials to educators through professional development workshops. It is common for two or more organizations to cosponsor PLT in a state. A requirement of sponsorship is providing a state coordinator to manage the program at the state level. Sometimes, this is a single position dedicated to fulfilling all the duties expected. Other times, this position is shared by “co-coordinators”, particularly when there is more than one sponsoring organization. Large states may find it necessary to distribute co-coordinators throughout the state to cover different geographical areas efficiently.

Most coordinators wear many hats. They are often coordinate PLT, as well as manage other programs and duties for their employer (the state sponsoring organization). **It is recommended that the state coordinator spend at least 50% of a full time position on the PLT program.** Although this is not always possible, it is important for state sponsors to understand that coordinating the state PLT program necessitates a significant amount of time and energy to assure program success.

The following position description outlines a desired set of responsibilities and qualifications for a coordinator or co-coordinator position(s).

Position Description

Maine Project Learning Tree Mission Statement:

Using the Forest as a “window on the natural world” Maine Project Learning Tree will:
1) increase educators’ knowledge, skills and concepts of the Maine’s diverse forest ecosystems; 2) expand educators’ ability to stimulate critical and creative thinking with Maine’s children and adults; 3) assist educators in providing the connections between Maine’s natural resources and people through the interdisciplinary and complementary curricula.

By achieving this mission, Maine PLT will play a major role in providing the citizens of the state with the tools to make informed decisions and take responsible environmental action.

We strive to achieve this mission by training educators in Project Learning Tree, one of the country's most time-honored environmental education curricula. The State Coordinator serves as the program director for the state program. The State Coordinator is a staff person of the Maine TREE Foundation and serves as their liaison with the National PLT Office. The State Coordinator also works with the ME PLT Steering Committee to develop the program's strategic direction and provide the leadership needed to improve and grow the state PLT program.

Key Responsibilities

The primary responsibility of the state coordinator is to initiate, supervise, and maintain PLT activities in the state, including implementing annual and long range plans, operating within an annual budget, developing and supporting a network of qualified facilitators, and designing, delivering, and evaluating quality professional development for educators.

These responsibilities include:

- Maintain an effective working relationship with national PLT and ensure all activities are consistent with the goals, policies, and procedures of the national program.
 - Serve as liaison to the national office, participate in activities and opportunities provided by National PLT, and work cooperatively on joint projects.
 - Collect, promote, and share success stories to support national and in-state marketing.
 - Maintain accurate recordkeeping and submit documentation to the national PLT program in a timely fashion, including annual reports, ordering of materials, participant surveys, and MOU documentation.
- Recruit, train, and manage a network of qualified workshop facilitators.
 - Determining the need, timing, and frequency of facilitator development within the state.
 - Oversee the effective design, delivery, and evaluation of professional development for PLT facilitators.
 - Manage database of facilitators, records, and communication within facilitator network.
 - Disseminate appropriate information throughout the state network.
- Design, deliver, and evaluate professional development for educators throughout the state.
 - Receive, review and approve workshop proposals.
 - Secure and provide workshop materials.

- Market and promote workshops through instate channels and Calendar of Events.
- Communicate with past and potential workshop participants.
- Work with the state Steering Committee to provide strategic vision and leadership to strengthen and grow organizational capacity to meet the needs of the program.
 - Prepare and implement long range strategic plans and associated annual work plans.
 - Review, comment and participate with the MTF Executive Director in preparing the annual operating budget.
 - Raise funds to support the program.
 - Market and promote PLT as a provider of high quality professional development.
- Develop and sustain strategic partnerships to meet the needs of the program.
- Manage day-to-day program operations.

3. INTRODUCTION TO MAINE PROJECT LEARNING TREE

BACKGROUND/HISTORY

Maine Project Learning Tree (MEPLT) is sponsored by the Maine TREE Foundation which is a private non-profit 501c3 organization founded in 1989 with a mission to educate and advocate for the sustainable use of the forest and the ecological, economic, and social health of Maine's forest community. The Maine TREE Foundation's Long-Term Education About Forests (LEAF) Program, introduced in 1997, significantly expanded the program to include both new elements and new supporters which forged a strong partnership with the Maine Forest Service in support of Project Learning Tree.

Since the summer of 1998, MTF has employed a full-time PLT state coordinator to work with teachers, scout and youth group leaders, home schoolers and other non-formal educators who wish to use the PLT curriculum. In 1999 the PLT, WET and WILD curriculums were correlated with the Maine Learning Results in five content areas. This correlation resulted in the increased use of the three EE programs by teachers and other educators throughout the state. As a program of the MTF, PLT has trained teachers in over 300 Maine schools and sixteen colleges and universities since 1999.

Maine TREE Foundation MISSION:

“The Maine TREE Foundation educates and advocates for the sustainable use of the forest and the ecological, economic, and social health of Maine's forest community.”

The Vision of the Maine TREE Foundation:

“The public values and supports Maine’s healthy forest ecosystems, forest professionals, scientific forest management, and sound public policies that sustain Maine’s forest-dependent people and communities.”

In 1977 Dean Bennett and Lorraine Stubbs hosted the first ME PLT Leadership meeting at Bryant Pond thus making Maine one of the first states in the US to become a PLT state. Since that time, Maine has annually recognized teachers, foresters and university professors as MEPLT Stewards. In the years since, ME PLT has sent six teachers to National PLT conferences as National Outstanding Educators.

4. CURRENT TRENDS IN EDUCATION

National trends in education include creating higher standards of student achievement and standards-based curriculum plans, as well as a greater emphasis on quantifiable success measures. Maine is a leader in providing technology to all schools and with this commitment Maine teachers and students use up to date laptops and iPads. It has become common practice for teachers to incorporate lessons using Smartphones and various social media.

ME PLT is committed to the task of distinguishing current PLT materials and programs as a beneficial element of current trends in Maine’s educational system. Environmental literacy requires an ability to develop comprehensive understandings of complex systems and strong skill sets in problem solving. Project Learning Tree’s approach of providing meaningful and relevant content that is aligned with standards-based goals and objectives gives educators in Maine the proper support structure needed to tackle and meet some of the more stringent content and literacy fundamentals expected of them in these changing educational times.

Maine PLT is also aware that online educational materials and training opportunities continue to grow and offer new cost-effective, time-reducing avenues for professional development. In addition to the current on-site training that offers high quality Project Learning Tree materials and professional development, ME PLT will need to focus efforts on providing additional layers of facilitator and peer support and communication through enhanced online technology systems and structures.

5. Maine Project Learning Tree's Strategic Planning Process

In 2013, the Maine Project Learning Tree Steering Committee developed a Strategic Plan as a three-year roadmap to inform and guide our efforts to become the premier resource for high quality environmental education in Maine. The plan was developed with broad involvement and support from the National Project Learning Tree office, the ME PLT Steering Committee and from statewide key stakeholders. This comprehensive planning process enabled ME PLT to identify the challenges and opportunities we are facing in Maine's education system and to determine the best use of our resources to tackle these issues.

Mid-year of the planning process 25 stakeholders representing the MTF Board of Directors, the ME PLT Steering Committee, business, non-profits, and education were invited to participate in a Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis of the ME PLT program. Dave Chase presented a process where all participants contributed comments and questions to each of the four stages of the SWOT. See page 9 for a summary of the resulting work.

Over the next three years, ME PLT is committed to meeting its strategic goals through strong leadership in local environmental education reform, seamless integration and alignment with local and national educational goals and standards, excellence in facilitator recruitment and training programs, and ease of access to valuable PLT curriculum resources that use trees and forests as windows on the world.

Definition of 'SWOT Analysis':

*A tool that identifies the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of an organization. Specifically, SWOT is a basic, straightforward model that assesses what an organization can and cannot do as well as its potential opportunities and threats. The method of SWOT analysis is to take the information from an environmental analysis and separate it into internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external issues (opportunities and threats). Once this is completed, SWOT analysis determines what may assist the firm in accomplishing its objectives, and what obstacles must be overcome or minimized to achieve desired results.**

* <http://www.investopedia.com/terms/s/swot.asp>

5. a) 2013 MAINE PROJECT LEARNING TREE SWOT ANALYSIS

Strengths:

1. State Coordinator
2. Sponsoring organization and SC
3. Support from National PLT
4. Longevity and reputation
5. Value “package” – curriculum, materials, workshop, hands-on, focus on current topics and issues, travels to teachers, attractively priced
6. Thematic connection w/ forest a big + in ME
7. Teacher Tour connection
8. Flexibility
9. Organization connections – forestry – education & environment.
10. Network – volunteers, facilitators, partners, educators, foresters, others in EE

Opportunities:

1. Planning for State Coordinator succession
2. Adding other partners & sponsors
3. Stronger role with National PLT
4. Diversifying revenue streams
5. Preservice audience
6. Ties to current educational testing, STEM, Common Core, and embedded curricula
7. New technologies
8. New workshop/PD formats
9. New audiences
10. Last Child in the Woods awareness
11. Sustainability consciousness

Weaknesses:

1. SC – ability to provide support – both money and time
2. Staff of one – soon to be retiring
3. Fiscal challenges, especially funding that rests on one sponsor
4. Ability to provide service statewide
5. “Traditional” workshop model
6. Program visibility
7. Use of new approaches and technologies in program

Challenges:

1. Teachers on overload
2. Current focus on assessment
3. Decreased focus on Science in at least some schools
4. Other similar EE programs
5. Other PD opportunities
6. Perception of PLT as “old and outdated”
7. “Getting kids outside”
8. Challenging funding environment
9. Decreasing volunteer time
10. Changes of forest industry in Maine

6. MAINE PLT STRATEGIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Goal One: Increase the visibility, awareness, and understanding of PLT in ME.

Objective 1: Use innovative communication strategies to increase awareness of PLT materials, resources, and professional opportunities

Outcome: Awareness of and demand for PLT materials and resources increase.

Metric: By 2015 ME PLT will reach 10% more educators and natural resource professionals above the 2013 and 2014 average.

Objective 2: Exhibit and present at statewide professional association conferences, summits and symposia, including curriculum coordinators and superintendent conferences.

Outcome: Maine PLT will be used by school districts for its value as a curriculum that enriches student learning and employs best practices for teachers.

Metric: Maine PLT will be utilized by 2 to 3 new school districts each year beginning in 2014.

Objective 3: Develop marketing materials that clearly define the ME PLT program.

Outcome: A PLT exhibit and other Maine specific materials will define our educational program as a valuable PreK-16 curriculum.

Metric: With support from National PLT, ME PLT will create new exhibit and marketing materials by June 2017.

Goal Two: Define, implement, and evaluate the evolving ME PLT PD model.

Objective 1: Develop new PD models that reflect current educational trends

Outcome: New models will be shared with all audiences that are part of the ME PLT network.

Metric: Workshop evaluations will indicate that workshops demonstrate current trends in education, such as use of technology and Next Generation Science Standards.

Objective 2: PLT facilitators will be trained to implement new models of Professional Development reflecting current educational trends.

Outcome: ME PLT facilitators will deliver workshops using new models of PD.

Metric: The Me PLT Steering Committee will plan and participate in a 2016 facilitator training reflecting new PD models

Goal Three: Strengthen ME PLT's ability to function efficiently and effectively.

Objective 1: Clarify roles and responsibilities of the ME PLT Steering Committee

Outcome: Steering Committee members understand roles & responsibilities so they can be active participants in advising the ME PLT program.

Metric: A PLT Steering Committee handbook for new members produced and distributed by 2015.

Objective 2: Develop a plan to enable ME PLT to smoothly transition the State Coordinator position from the current Coordinator to her eventual successor.

Outcome: A written succession plan and State Coordinator job description will guide hiring and training practices for a new ME PLT State Coordinator

Metric: A succession plan and updated job description will be researched, reviewed, and adopted by mid-2016.

Objective 3: ME PLT is structured and operated in accordance with National PLT's Best Management Practices* for state programs.

Outcome: The ME PLT program will regularly assesses the program's fit with National PLT's Best Management practices.

Metric: The ME PLT program will be structured and operated consistently with National PLT's Best Management Practices for state programs.

* *Best Management Practices Self-Assessment Tool - BMPSAT*

Objective 4: Build partnerships between and among MTF, ME PLT, and organizations, agencies, and businesses with compatible visions, missions, and plans.

Outcome: Partners will be defined and recognized in cooperation with the MTF.

Metric: By September 2016, ME PLT will form partnerships with no less than two new partners.

Goal Four: Optimize ME PLT's financial sustainability and resilience.

Objective 1: The Maine PLT Steering Committee may pursue additional revenue strategies for the program while maintaining current financial support from MTF.

Outcome: The ME PLT Steering Committee may recommend additional revenue strategies to the MTF Board of Directors for expanding our outreach.

Metric: Revenue strategies will be defined in the PLT Steering Committee handbook.

Project Learning Tree is a program of the American Forest Foundation. MEPLT is sponsored by the Maine TREE Foundation. ME PLT appreciates support from the Maine TREE Foundation, the American Forest Foundation and in-kind services from the Maine Forest Service.

This plan was created with direct financial support from the American Forest Foundation and from the Maine TREE Foundation for the Coordinator's time.

Final approval of the MAINE PLT Steering Committee May 14, 2014.