

The Sage Creek Prairie School

Operations Manual

Swift Current, Saskatchewan

Established in 2020



Owner and Operator: Kristen Simonson

Certified by the Forest School Association and the
Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (*B. Ed, B. Sc in Biology*)

Contact Information:

Address: 11th Avenue Northeast, Swift Current Swift Current, Saskatchewan

Land Location: 2-16-14 W3, SE portion

Social Media Sites:

Email: sagecreekprairieschool@gmail.com

Facebook/Instagram: @sagecreekprairieschool

Website: www.sagecreekprairieschool.ca

I. Introduction to Sage Creek:

Our mandate at the Sage Creek Prairie School is:

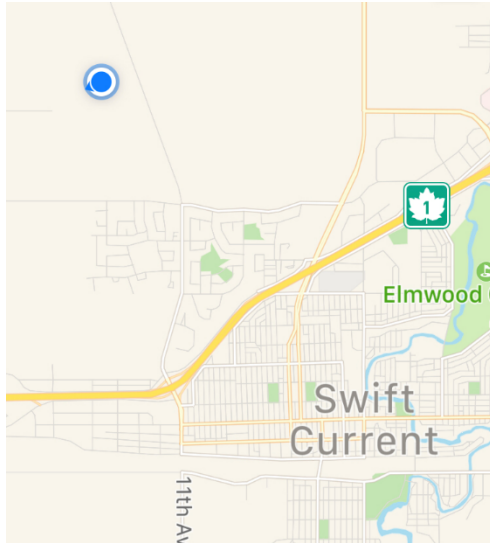
- To continue to **reconnect with the natural beauty** that surrounds them.
- To allow individuals to **pause, rest, appreciate, and just BE.**
- To **enjoy natural spaces with grace and respect**, knowing that others have come before them, and others will follow them in the future.
- To recognize that **wonder and creativity are purposeful components of learning.**
- To make use of teachable moments and **reconnect individuals with native prairie wildlife.**
- To gather a **collection of useful skills that allow individuals to visit wild places safely, independently, and without adding to the human impact** that already exists.
- To provide a framework for meditation, relaxation, and recognition that **nature can effectively reduce anxiety, engage learners, provide a multitude of different sensory experiences, and ground even the most hectic of lifestyles.**
- To provide **appropriate scaffolding of risky play activities**, allowing participants to build resilience, reduce stress, and foster positive strategies to improve mental wellbeing

Our program was established in 2020 as a certified Forest School; to become certified, instructors must pass a **rigorous academic and practical course and demonstrate knowledge of the Forest Schools approach, wilderness skills, and how to incorporate this knowledge into a program adapted to their unique ecosystem.**

While we do not have established forests in the Swift Current area, we will utilize one of the native prairie coulee ecosystems in the area and modify Forest School principles to match the location. With these parameters in mind, the Sage Creek Prairie School was established. As we move into post-COVID times, it is our hope that all of our programming is in place by spring, 2021.

II. Location:

The Sage Creek Prairie School is conveniently located on the northwest edge of the Swift Current city limits, on private property with approval from the current landowner. The official land description is 2-16-14 W3, southeast portion.



A quick drive north on 11th Avenue, the Prairie School is located beside the Archery Range.

A private road provides a safe parking space for numerous vehicles (*including personal vehicles and small busses*), while access to the main site is a short walk on a native prairie trail to a treed garden area and sheltered aspen coulee. Main trails are simply modified deer trails; they have been cleared for safety only, as we support the Leave No Trace movement and do not want to remove native vegetation from the area for unnecessary reasons.

Sage Creek has three outdoor areas which we will be utilizing during our sessions:

1. Our Preschool and Young Learner Space:



- featuring a “lavvu”, a mud kitchen, art wall, music wall, a loose parts zone, a digging area, garden plot and access to our main fire pit and cooking area

2. Our Student and Adult Learning Space:



- featuring an outdoor classroom structure, a nearby garden and food forest, a community fire pit and eating area

3. Our “Beyond Classroom” Learning Space:



- our most rugged and wild location: the site of our bush classroom area, hammocks, knots area, our wilderness fire pit, backcountry kitchen, a variety of trails, a seasonal creek, and the future site of our yoga on the landscape and parachute shelter!

III. Land Description:

The Sage Creek Prairie School is located on private property, in a native prairie coulee ecosystem northwest of the City of Swift Current.

Purpose of the Land:

- The area is bordered on one side by constantly cropped agricultural land, while the other three sides are bordered by native grass pasture ranchland
- Fenced along the north side in 2014, the coulee has been unused for five years
- Due to its large, steep northern ridge and deep bottom, the coulee feels remote, peaceful, and far-removed from the nearby urban centre.

Climate:

- Typical of a Zone Two, semi-arid prairie environment
- Precipitation: average of 345mm per year
- Temperature Range: -40 'C to +40 'C

Geology and Hydrology:

- Soil types in the area include loam, clay loam, and sandy loam
- Coulee land topography is a remnant of glacial melting, and now forms an important component of the local watershed (*Swift Current Creek*)
- Freshwater run-off exits the coulee to the east, using the riparian area at the bottom as a natural vegetation filter
- Mid-way through the coulee is a seasonal spring, running through the spring and summer, and then slowing for winter months

Flora:

- The area is a typical native prairie grassland ecosystem with a biodiverse population of grasses, shrubs and small deciduous trees.
- Species include native grasses (*blue grama, needle and thread, range fescue, and others*), native shrubs (*red osier dogwood, willow, buffalo berry, and caragana*) and deciduous trees (*poplar, trembling aspen, saskatoon, chokecherry, etc.*)

Fauna:

- The area supports a wide diversity of animal life
- Species include insects (*dragonflies, fireflies, mosquitoes, etc.*), amphibians (*leopard frogs, tiger salamanders*), reptiles (*garter snakes, bullsnakes*), songbirds (*robin, blackbird, meadowlark, mourning dove*), raptors (*great horned owls, red-tailed hawk*), rodents (*weasels, porcupines, 13-lined ground squirrels*), and large mammals (*whitetail deer, mule deer, moose, antelope, cougar, etc*)

There are no overtly dangerous or toxic plants or animals on our property.

Monitoring Projects:

- For the past five years, the area has been actively monitored by the environmental science students at SCCHS
 - Areas of focus include the biodiversity of vegetation, the state of invasive species, areas of increasing human impact, and any change in water quality
 - The compilation of data complements a study done by the City of Swift Current to determine the path of a highway bypass on the southern border of the property.
 - As the use of the area increases, it will be important to monitor any changing conditions and make any reparations necessary

Mitigation of the School Area Environment:

- Human impact can have a negative impact on a natural space, so it will be a priority for us to ensure the area remains, or even increases, its biodiversity and health as an ecosystem
- Trails will follow established deer paths, and the school area will be located in a natural clearing in the trees.
- As part of our dedication to maintaining the ecosystem, native trees and shrubs will be relocated on a yearly basis from the property tree nursery to the north.
- Garbage and non-native materials like used fencing products will gradually be relocated or repurposed if possible.



IV. Visitor Information

Visitors to our location are always welcome and are expected to enter and exit the designated learning area from the parking lot located to the North. A visitor will be defined as *“any person who is not a participant involved in a program, or an employee of the Sage Creek Prairie School or a member of the staff from the Chinook School Division”*.

The reasons behind designated visitor entry and exit points are numerous; the site is located on a **sensitive native prairie landscape** and minimizing our impact from multiple entry points is a priority. Also, a trained instructor will provide insight to the area in terms of safety and obstacles, which will prevent possible injury while in the learning area.



Late afternoon thunderstorm rolling in.

V. Philosophy of the Prairie School:

The philosophy of all Forest School programs means that the experiences of each group of students will be “learner-led”, and therefore different; **certain skills and experiences will be part of some programs but not others**. Some programs may use fire building or tool use in their programming (*due to interest or need*), while others may not use them at all (*because students are not ready, not interested, or they are actively engaged in other experiences*).

Decisions regarding these issues will be made by the leader of the program after the students attending each session are observed and learning outcomes are established.

Most programs, regardless of age or ability, **will have a fire** (*either wood if no established fire bans, or propane if too dry*) to end off each session.



Sara, lighting a fire for the group using skills learned on site

VI. Our Partnership with the Chinook School Division

The Sage Creek Prairie School program is currently running trial programming in conjunction with the Chinook School Division as a method of increasing engagement in learning, as well as decreasing levels of stress and anxiety experienced by many students. **Research has continually proven that outdoor learning can achieve both goals for participants while providing quality educational experiences.** Interested educators can book their students for a **minimum of six sessions, with sessions occurring once per week for six weeks.**

- First semester sessions will **start in late September, and run through the end of October**, and **spring sessions will run again in late March until the end of May**. Students are welcome to attend both session sets.

The types of activities experienced by students in these programs will **depend greatly on the type of student in the programs**, but all sessions will involve natural resources for inspiration, to enable ideas and to encourage intrinsic motivation.



Coming across a cougar kill site, a sheltered session out of the wind, basket-making, and shelter-building

Links to Saskatchewan Curriculum:

Any group of students can benefit from spending time outdoors, and **literally any curriculum can complement our school setting**. Here are some **established links that our program can provide teachers of multiple subjects and age groups**:

- **Art** (*dance, role play, music, color, paint, “loose piece creations”, construction*)
- **English** (*reflection, creation, writing prompts, poetry, communication, theatre*)
- **Science** (*classification of species, prairie ecosystems, observation, characteristics, horticulture, wild foraging, sustainability, native species, tracking*)
- **Physical Education** (*movement in all dimensions, analyzing risks, body awareness, task completion such as building, wood chopping, or path clearing*)
- **Foods** (*campfire cooking, foraging for edibles, collection, storage*)
- **Construction** (*whittling, tool creation, furniture*)

And many others...the sky is the limit for ways to involve young people in nature!

VII. Pre-school and After School Programming

Sage Creek will cater specifically to our youngest participants in a 1.5 hour morning session which makes “free play” and creative play the primary focus.

- we have designed a specific area with our young people in mind....an outdoor classroom with access to a swing, digging area, loose parts bin, music wall, mud kitchen, art station, climbing structures, vertical garden and garden plot.
- the location is both easy to access and relatively flat; wheelchairs are absolutely welcome!
- on inclement weather days, we may walk to our favorite location in the shelter of the trees
- older participants will mostly use our “beyond classroom”, exploring trails and using imaginations in creative play and scaffolded risk taking activities



Our youngest members playing with the animal bucket, and our school-aged students pretending to be part of the local whitetail herd

VIII. Criteria of Enrollment

The Sage Creek Prairie School firmly believes in the benefits of a safe, natural outdoor environment for all participants to enjoy.

To ensure that everyone can enjoy our outdoor space during a session, we will adhere to the following guidelines

For School Groups:

- Teachers can **book students into the program in advance**, giving the educator time to prepare for any special circumstances for students in the group such as special abilities or requirements
- The ideal Forest School **leader to participant ratio** is 1:6, but because these participants are in middle years or high school, **we will follow a 1:10 ratio** that follows **established outdoor education guidelines for the Chinook School Division**.
- **All students must attend the first session of the six-session series**; this is where we will ***establish our protocol for each individual group***, outline ***safety and emergency information*** and ***introduce students to the learning area***.
- At any point, if students are exhibiting unsafe behavior that is *reckless, destructive to the outdoor area, involves emotional/physical abuse towards self or others, involves the misuse of tools*, or any other circumstance where an **instructor feels the safety and wellbeing of the students is threatened**, that student will be removed immediately. Please see Section VIII for detailed management plans

For preschool age, school age, and adult programming:

All participants must pre-register so our first aid and information is up to date upon arrival.

The learning area is a native prairie setting that students are invited to explore and enjoy spending time in the outdoors. Maintaining this opportunity for all participants is a top priority for our program.

IX. Participant Transportation

Young Participants *(not of driving age)*:

Students who are not of age to legally drive themselves will be transported to and from the location by either parents/guardians, or an approved vehicle by the group taking part in the sessions. This will be **reconfirmed on the application form** before the participant arrives at the learning site.

Older Participants *(of legal driving age)*:

Participants who are old enough to have their **drivers' license** are **allowed to transport themselves by personal vehicle to and from the learning site** *(a short drive from the local high school)*. Any **restrictions on a driver license must be adhered to** *(such as number of students in a vehicle, learners permit, etc.)* Participants must **fill out a transportation waiver** *(signed prior to the starting date of the sessions by their parents/guardians)* before they can drive themselves due to insurance purposes. Once at the site, participants will be directed where to **safely park to ensure vehicles can be moved without issue**.

*****If unsafe or illegal driving occurs while the participant is en route to the session, actions by the leader or participating school may include removal from the sessions, and/or involvement of the police.*****



X. Emergency Management Plan

- **Extreme Weather** (*storm, tornado, wind*)
- **Extreme Cold** (*-25 'C wind chill or greater*)
- **Extreme Heat** (*+35 'C or greater*)
- **Extreme Fire Risk**

Any time we participate in outdoor education and activity, we must be aware of possible weather events that could put our students at risk. Many of these risks can be mitigated with good planning of clothing or monitoring the weather, but in extreme circumstances the following actions will be taken.

In forecasted extreme weather;

- Sessions will be cancelled, and an **additional session will be added after the final week** to make up the time lost
- This would **include severe cold** (*anything below -25 'C*), **severe heat** (*anything above +35 'C*), and **extreme weather events** such as blizzards, tornadoes, or thunderstorms.



A prairie thunderstorm, and a chilly session in early March (minus 20 'C)

In unplanned extreme weather that arises during a session;

- Students will be *moved into a sheltered area, and parents will be contacted to pick up their student.*
- If travel is not recommended, such as in a hail event, then the student will *remain at the location in a safe, protected area until the weather has passed.*
- Unplanned weather events would include thunderstorms or extreme wind

In emergency events;

- Students will ***move to a predetermined designated safe zone***
- Once gathered, ***plans will be made to stay in place, or move depending on the scenario at hand***
- Emergency events could include scenarios such as an uncontrolled wildfire, or medical emergency
- When appropriate to do so, parents and guardians will be **notified by cell phone** about the circumstances and plans will be made to transport students out of the area

XI. Interventions

Grievances may arise during the session itself or become evident after a session is over. In both cases, we will **use the following protocol to deal with any situations that arise**. This series of interventions is outlined in the SCCHS Student Handbook, and we will adopt this protocol to be suitable to our area and program.

We do not expect to experience serious distractions or safety concerns. Participants in Forest School certified programs value their time in a natural setting, often showing a marked decrease in negative behavior during their session outdoors as they are based on interests they find important. In all cases, guardians will be kept informed.

Minor Distractions

- Classified as anything that **distracts others from their participation**
- This would include **profanity, teasing or taunting, arguments, use of technology, misuse of tools, minor safety issues, or misuse of the school property**

Consequences:

- Participants are temporarily removed from group setting, and the affecting behavior is discussed with the group leader
- If remediation is required, it will be at the group leader's discretion

Repeated Minor Distractions

- If the distracting behavior continues, the student will be removed from the session on that day, with the opportunity to return the next session.
- As we encourage self-awareness and minimizing negative impact, once a behavior ceases to negatively affect others, an ideal outcome would be to rejoin their session peers.

Consequences:

- If we find a participant is requiring our attention on a constant basis, we may advise parents and teachers that a period of time away from the session programming would be a benefit to other participants in the program, and allow the participant to reflect on the behavior in question

Serious Safety Issues, or Gross Disrespect of Trust

In a program such as this, some participants will be **experiencing potentially risky play and independence for the first time**. Leaders will be expecting this and will make safety a priority until participants know how to **manage these new skills while in the learning space**.

- Included would **substance abuse, violence, or a disregard for the safety of others**.

If a participant refuses to acknowledge their own safety, the safety of others or of the space itself, they will not participate in the remainder of the sessions.

XII. Allergies and Sensitivities

Participants will be spending their entire sessions in the outdoors, and will encounter plant species, wildlife, and other allergens that are produced from many different sources. Known allergies that can result in a severe reaction (*including anaphylaxis*) **must be divulged on the medical form** each participant must fill out **prior to participation**. Mild or moderate allergic reactions can be treated with the removal of the allergen, and medication (*such as Benadryl*), and **permission to give medication in this case should be given on the medical form**. Participants that require an inhaler for environmental or exercise-induced asthma should **carry it with them at all times** in the case of an attack.

If a student encounters an allergen and has a reaction, the **parents or guardians will be notified immediately**. If necessary, **EMS will be contacted and the participant transported to medical services**.

Full disclosure on the medical form prior to participation can prevent a potential medical emergency.



Bees are regular visitors to the coulee.

XIII. Cell Phone Use

While participating in the program, **cell phone use will be limited**, and will either be left in backpacks, personal vehicles or collected at the beginning of the session. The **leader will have their personal cell phone at all times** in case of emergency and to monitor changing weather conditions.

A key component of this style of programming is to “unplug” from technology and appreciate time spent in nature. If participants are connected to their technology, they will not be able to engage fully in the session, which is **designed to form a reconnection with the outdoors**.

For this reason, cell phones may be collected from all participants at the beginning of the session and returned after the session is over.



XIV. Bathroom Facilities

While participating in a session, there will be a **designated private bathroom area** complete with a **handwashing station**. Some students may be comfortable with the idea of “*pee behind the tree*” which is also acceptable and carry a small backpack with their own hand sanitizer. **Warm water and soap will be supplied to everyone** before the wrap up at the end of the session.

XV. Pre-Session Checklist (*staff*)

Before we take a group of students out into our learning setting, we do need to **ensure we are prepared for the many different scenarios which could occur**. Our checklist for all leaders prior to beginning their sessions is as follows:

1. **Approval from appropriate school authorities, or parents/guardians**
 - Paperwork has been approved and filed (online submissions as well)
 - Participant waivers and medical information sheets have been collected from classroom teacher
2. **Site has been prepared**
 - First aid kit checked, tools checked
 - Bathroom facilities restocked (*private area, handwashing station*)
 - Firewood chopped and stacked (*axe, hatchet, kindling*)
 - Cooking equipment checked
 - Ingredients for campfire are prepared and moved to site
 - Gear bag is packed and checked (*safety equipment, fire kit, etc.*)
 - *First aid kit, fire kit, book with medical forms, charged cell phone, gloves, layers of clothing, bug spray, jack knife*
3. **Weather Forecast is Checked** (*one day prior*)
4. **Introduction activities are prepared** and moved to site
5. Final **walk-through safety check** (*presence of animals in area, sharp branches, slippery sections of trail*)
6. **Cell phone is charged/ready**
7. **Review medical portion** of forms



A moose is in the area!

XVI. A Typical Sage Creek Prairie School Session:

Example: Grade Eleven Environmental Science, 90-120 minutes

- Arrival and meet-up at the parking lot
- **5 minute foraging walk** down together to the site (*anything of interest picked up, feathers, berries, egg shells, seed pods, evidence of invasive species*)
- Arrival at base camp to drop off bags and backpacks
- Introductory activity is outlined;
 - Session Theme: "It's a Small World" **(5 minutes)**
 - **Microscopic scavenger hunt (20 minutes)**
 - (*invertebrates, textures, edibles, etc.*)
 - **Resources available:**
 - identification and classification books, magnifying glasses, baskets, lists, small nets
- **Free Activity Time (40 minutes--?)** (*continuing with scavenger hunt, whittling, creating, exploring, den building, etc....all student-directed and leader-supported!*)
- **Fire and Wrap Up (25 minutes--?)**
 - Sharing of findings, tasting edibles, group discussions, reflections
 - Preparation of food (*tea and hot drinks during cold weather, and a snack using local ingredients such as berries or honey*)
- Home

Example: Grade Nine, English and Language Arts, 90-120 minutes

- Arrival and meet-up at the parking lot
- **5 minute walk** down together to the site (*anything of interest picked up, feathers, berries, egg shells, seed pods, evidence of invasive species*)
- Arrival at base camp to drop off bags and backpacks
- Introductory activity is outlined;
 - Session Theme; "Surviving and Conquering"
 - **Lost in the Barrens Activity (Den construction-20 minutes)**
- **Free Activity Time (40 minutes--?)**
 - (*continuing with den-building, whittling, creating, exploring, etc....all student-directed and leader-supported!*)
- **Edibles in the Landscape: Foraging Walk (20 minutes)**
 - *Saskatoons, strawberries, rose hips*
- **Fire and Wrap Up (25 minutes--?)**
 - Sharing of findings, tasting edibles, group discussions, reflections
 - Preparation of food (*tea and hot drinks during cold weather, and a snack using local ingredients such as berries or honey*)
- Home

We find that during the first session, **students need to explore the area independently**, and will do so on their own or in small groups for the entire session. This is incredibly important as they develop their sense of place and begin to locate landmarks or activities they may want to visit at a later time. **Leaders will often bring items with us that we think may add to the session** (such as a print guide for tracking, or a deer antler) or **visit a place that we think participants will enjoy** (such as our Canada goose nesting site). After that, we listen to what the **participants would like to experience during their next session, and act as a support while they plan for activities.**



Orienteering in the trees using a compass

XVII. The Role of the Leaders:

Being a “forest school” leader in our outdoor sessions is ***not being a teacher***. Leaders do not set out to teach to a specific curriculum; instead, they support participants as they choose activities to fill their sessions...by providing opportunities to use tools or art supplies to create, resources to use while identifying organisms, or the ability to perfect skills through safe practices (such as fire lighting, fort building, or wood carving). **It cannot be emphasized enough that the participants are in charge**, and activities may change at the spur of the moment or carry over for multiple sessions.

For example, a quest to locate antler sheds in the spring may take students all over the area on multiple occasions, which can lead into knowledge acquisition on tracking and identification.



The other one is found...a matching set of mule deer antler sheds.

Leaders are certified in and have extensive knowledge of **forest school principles, outdoor education, risk management, first aid/emergency awareness, and environmental sustainability**. These skills will provide participants with a multitude of safe and engaging learning opportunities.



Parental Approval for Off-Campus Activity

Swift Current Comprehensive High School

Student Name: _____

Grade: _____

Drivers Licence and Level (*if applicable*): _____

Hospitalization Number: _____

Emergency Contact (*Name and Phone Number*):

Existing Medical Conditions and/or Medication Being Taken: _____

Activity: Six-Week Outdoor Session

Sage Creek Prairie School, Swift Current

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Thank-you!

Kristen Simonson

Owner and Operator

Sage Creek Prairie School



Sage Creek Prairie School

Outdoor Session Registration Form 2020– 2021

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Name: _____

Grade: _____

Birth Date (*month/day/year*): _____ Age: _____

Parent(s)/Guardian(s) Name: _____

Home Address: _____

Home Phone: _____ Work Phone: _____

MEDICAL HISTORY:

Hospitalization Number: _____

Do you have any other medical insurance (*MSI, Blue Cross, etc.*)? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, list the medical insurance number: _____

List any health problems you have (*asthma, known allergies, anxiety, diabetes, etc.*).

Do you take regular medication for these health problems? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, name the medication(s) you take. _____

Do leaders have permission to administer medication if medically necessary? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Please list any activities your participant enjoys (*building, hiking, active play, birdwatching, etc.*)

As a parent/guardian, I give my permission for the above student to participate in the session titled _____ at the Sage Creek Prairie School running from _____.

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

Date: _____



Sage Creek Prairie School Outdoor Sessions

Materials and Supplies List: Spring Session

Spring weather on the prairies can be unpredictable! To be prepared for your outdoor adventures, please gather the following items before your first session.

Clothing:

- Pair of long pants
- Pair of sturdy shoes (*closed toe, grip on sole*)
- Light jacket
- Heavier jacket
- Ski pants
- Rain jacket and pants
- Mitts and headwear
- Winter boots

Backpack:

- Water bottle
- Insulated mug/thermos
- Personal medication (Epi-Pens, inhalers, etc.)
- Hand sanitizer
- Bug spray

Optional Gear:

- Camera
- Sunscreen

Please **do not bring** the following:

- Weapons of any kind
- Cell phone (*collected at the beginning of each session*)

Any special gear such as fire kits, tools, or cooking gear will be provided for you at each session and will be supervised by the leader of that session.

learning
Self-esteem
Progression
Nature
Tool
Responsibility
engagement
Relationship
Risk
Sensory
Peer-led
Kinaesthetic
education
Place-relation
Relationships
Independence
woods
Skills
others
Language
Imagination
Resourcefulness
Classroom
Discovery
Improvisation
use
Curriculum
Experimentation
nature
Communication
Self-awareness

