Colorado Collective Outcomes Evaluation Toolkit

Module 1: Introduction to Evaluation and Collective Impact

What is evaluation and why do we do it?

As evaluation grows increasingly more popular in the nonprofit, philanthropic, and government sectors, it is important that practitioners develop a basic understanding of what evaluation is and why it is important. Program evaluation is widely recognized as the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics, and results of programs to make judgments about the program, improve or further develop program effectiveness, inform decisions about future programming, and/or increase understanding (Patton, 2008).

There are many benefits of evaluation, and organizations evaluate their programs for many reasons. Evaluation helps organizations accomplish the following:

- Authentically engage with their constituents
- Understand their constituents
- Improve their programs
- Understand their programs' outcomes
- Document progress toward achieving their outcomes
- Communicate successes to their community
- Provide information to funders and stakeholders
- Raise additional funds
- Advance knowledge in their field
- Increase staff morale and confidence

Core Values of Evaluation in Environmental Education

NAAEE developed a set of core values to guide evaluation in environmental education based on the collective wisdom of environmental education researchers, practitioners, policymakers, funders and evaluators. These core values help define the relationship between effective program evaluation and environmental education, in order to conduct high-quality program evaluation that contributes to healthier communities and equitable outcomes. The six core values include:

- **Collective Evaluation.** Collective evaluation allows for shared learning between organizations and networks. It relies on collective wisdom and utilizes multiple perspectives, approaches and forms of measurement.

- **Equity in Motion.** Evaluators have an obligation to design and conduct evaluations that take into consideration the disparity that exists within and between groups of individuals. Evaluations determine which viewpoints and perspectives will be highlighted. They also influence decision-making processes. Evaluators need to recognize the role power dynamics, white privilege and structural oppression take in the work.

- **Authentic Engagement.** Authentic engagement is dedicated to collaboration, inclusivity, capacity-building, and civic action in order to create healthier communities and equitable outcomes. Evaluations should include individuals impacted by the programs as key stakeholders in the evaluation and involve them as team members, designers, decision-makers and implementers of the evaluation.

- **Deep Curiosity.** It is imperative to include the perspectives of the cultures, histories and traditions of those involved in the programs and evaluations. Every person brings different meaning to key concepts and it's important to understand whose definitions are used in the evaluation. This often requires time and space to engage the community in developing tools and processes.

- **Lifelong Learning and Critical Reflection.** Evaluation leads to growth at the individual and organizational level, which often require humility, self-reflection and accountability. By creating a culture that celebrates the courage to question assumptions and practices, organizations can explore differences and understand how differences, biases and power influence evaluations.

- **High Quality Evaluation.** High quality evaluations balance sociopolitical (political, social, historical, cultural and organizational), ethical and technical (evaluation planning, implementing and reporting) considerations. High quality evaluation needs to be cultural responsive and embedded in programming.

What is the Colorado Collective Outcomes Project?

CAEE has been engaged in a multi-year effort to bring together EE practitioners, evaluators, and funders to create and implement shared outcomes, with the goal of being able to demonstrate the role of EE in improving quality of life in Colorado. CAEE initiated a robust process of gathering community feedback in order to start establishing collective outcomes in Colorado.

The primary goal of this project, now referred to as Colorado Collective Outcomes, is to move all Colorado EE stakeholders closer to a shared language and a common understanding for intended outcomes across the state.

CAEE has identified the following five major outcome areas that encompass Colorado EE initiatives:
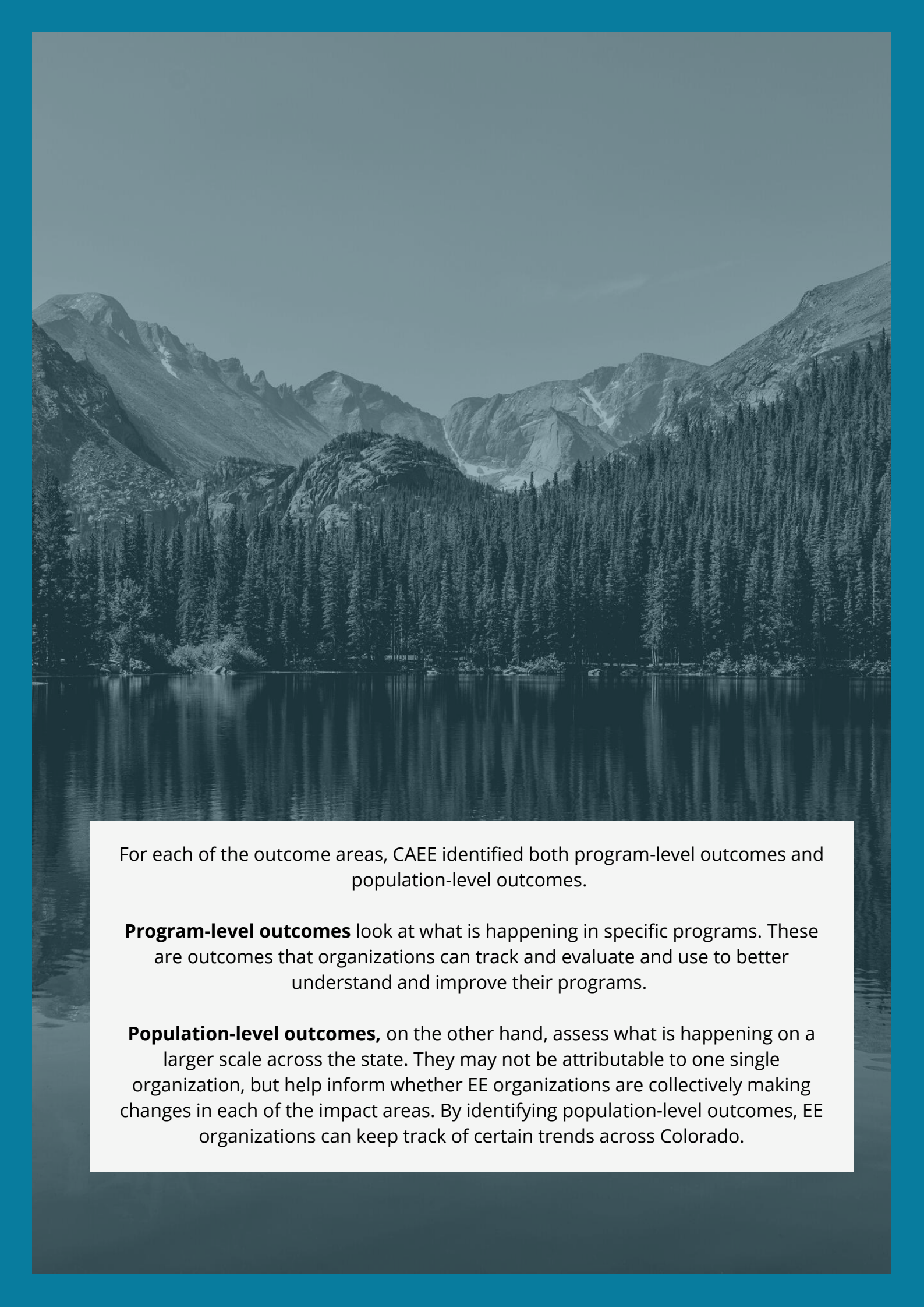
- Conservation
- Education
- Positive Youth Development
- Health and Wellness
- Social Justice

Which of these outcome areas align with your programs?

Table 1: Colorado Collective Outcomes Project—Five Outcome Areas Defined

Outcome Area	Result	Programming
Conservation	All Colorado ecosystems are healthy, vibrant, and valued.	Programs with conservation outcomes include those that increase environmental knowledge, improve environmental awareness and attitudes, and inspire positive environmental actions that lead to improvements in environmental quality.
Education	Environmental education supports and ensures all PreK-12 students are lifelong learners with successful school outcomes.	Programs with education outcomes include those that improve academic performance, increase E-STEAM literacy, improve standardized test scores, and expand school engagement using the environment as an integrating context.
Positive Child and Youth Development	All Colorado children and youth grow into responsible, resilient, engaged citizens that care for themselves, their natural environment, and their communities.	Programs with youth development outcomes are aimed at guiding young people as they grow into responsible, engaged citizens that care for the environment and their communities. These outcomes may be achieved through strengths-based programs focused on character and leadership combined with outdoor experiences or community service.
Health and Wellness	Through increased safe access, connection to and comfort in the natural environment, all Coloradans are healthy and well—physically, mentally, and emotionally.	Programs with health and wellness outcomes are focused on improving physical, mental, emotional, and social health and wellness for participants through connection with nature. Health outcomes include improving nutrition, increasing physical fitness, reducing stress and anxiety, recovering from physical or psychological trauma, and increasing awareness and understanding of personal and environmental health.
Social Justice	All Coloradans have access to and opportunity to experience the outdoors.	Programs with social justice outcomes include those that increase access and opportunity for underserved communities and underrepresented populations. These outcomes include increasing access to outdoor experiences, improving urban green space, and developing and supporting environmental educators and leaders from traditionally underrepresented groups.

For each of the outcome areas, CAEE identified both program-level outcomes and population-level outcomes.

Program-level outcomes look at what is happening in specific programs. These are outcomes that organizations can track and evaluate and use to better understand and improve their programs.

Population-level outcomes, on the other hand, assess what is happening on a larger scale across the state. They may not be attributable to one single organization, but help inform whether EE organizations are collectively making changes in each of the impact areas. By identifying population-level outcomes, EE organizations can keep track of certain trends across Colorado.

Table 2: Colorado Collective Outcomes Project—Population Level and Program Level Outcomes

Outcome Area	Population-level outcomes*	Program-level outcomes**
Conservation	• Increase in connection to nature across all of Colorado's demographics • Increase in environmental behaviors • Increase in quality: water, air, and soil	• Increase in connection to nature • Increase in stewardship actions • Increase in desire to participate in positive environmental actions • Increase in positive attitudes toward nature and environment • Increase in awareness and knowledge of cultural, biological, and scientific systems
Education	• Increase in schools with EE • Increase in students' level of engagement in learning (attendance and referrals) • Increase in academic testing scores • Increase in students enrolled in NR/ENVS degree program	• Increase in understanding of EE program content • Increase in engagement in learning • Increase in time spent on EE in the classroom and outdoors • Increase in culturally relevant curriculum • Increase in professional development in environmental education • Increase in workforce readiness skills

Positive Child and Youth Development	• Increase in opportunities for civic or community engagement
	• Increase in programs that support PYD Components:
	  o Competence
	  o Confidence
	  o Character
	  o Caring
	  o Connection
	  o Contribution
	• Increase in opportunities that provide a continuum of experience between organizations, partnerships, and other collaborations
		• Increase in civic and community engagement
		• Increase in understanding of healthy and unhealthy risk
		• Increase in critical thinking/problem solving skills
		• Increase in self-efficacy
		• Increase in participants' competence, confidence, character, caring, connection or contribution
		• Increase in youth-directed internships, mentors, authentic adult and peer relationships

Health and Wellness	• Increase in time in nature • Decrease in systemic barriers to accessing nature • Increase in understanding of the connection between healthy environment and healthy self • Improved physical, mental and emotional health • Decrease in stress, depression, fatigue, sedentary lifestyle and chronic illness • Increase in access to healthy nutrition	• Increase in time spent in nature • Decrease in barriers to accessing nature • Increase in comfort and enjoyment to explore outdoor spaces • Increase in self-agency in the outdoors • Decrease in fear, anxiety, unknown • Increase in sense of place and place connection • Increase in perceived wellness and health as result of being in outdoors • Increase in outdoor community-based health interventions

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* Population level outcomes: a measure that encompasses population-level data points as opposed to individual programs or persons
** Program level outcomes: a measure that assesses individual programs or persons

Social Justice	• Increase in communities with access to safe, natural and healthy environments • Increase in Coloradans who feel welcomed and comfortable in outdoor spaces • Decrease in barriers to accessing nature • Use of outdoor spaces reflects demographics of community • Increase in commitment to DEI within organizations	• Increase in participants who feel welcome and comfortable in outdoor spaces • Increase in programs honoring diversity in outdoor spaces • Increase in diversity of organizational leadership, program staff and mentors • Increase in DEI training for staff • Increase in culturally aware and responsive programming • Improved access to outdoor spaces for all abilities

Look through the program-level outcomes and identify which ones align with your work. Are you in a position to start tracking data for them? We would love to learn more about how your work supports the Colorado Collective Outcomes Project.

In Part 2 of this workshop series we will be discussing tools and data collection methods.

Grounding in Research and Data

CAEE partnered with Point b(e) Strategies to prepare a report to complement this evaluation toolkit called *Grounding in Research and Data: A Toolkit for Environmental Education Organizations to Understand Outcomes and Impact.* This report outlines detailed information about the five outcome areas by providing research that grounds the rationale for their selection and details examples of population level data sources to complement organization-led and program-level data collection efforts.

This complementary report includes the following information for each of the five Colorado Collective Outcome impact areas--conservation, education, positive youth development, health and wellness and social justice:

- **Overview** of the impact area.
- **Questions and considerations** to guide organization's selection of impact areas/outcomes.
- **Research** to ground the importance of the impact area for EE organizations.
- Examples of **publicly available data sources**.
- Recommended **narrative framework** to "tell your EE story" with examples from EE organizations.

Dig into the full report for outcome areas your organization is working toward. This report provides information that will not only help you with evaluation, but also with grantwriting!

Why is the Colorado Collective Outcomes Project Important?

By collaborating with organizations statewide to work toward and evaluate common outcomes, CAEE is hopeful that we can create a common language and a unified voice about the role of EE in Colorado. There are numerous benefits to measuring the same outcomes across EE organizations.

- By measuring the same things, organizations can utilize the same evaluation tools and methods and share lessons learned across organizations. EE organizations statewide can engage in collective learning as a network and use lessons learned to improve programs.

- By measuring the same outcomes across the state and with different populations, EE organizations can one day aggregate the data to assess the statewide impact of EE.

- Through establishing common outcomes, we can bring strength to our voice as a field, illustrate our collective impact, contribute to research and best practices, and increase understanding by the philanthropic community.

Think about how your engagement in Colorado Collective Outcomes can benefit your organization's work.

Additional Resources

North American Association for Environmental Education, eeLEARN Module 3: Research and Evaluation
https://eepro.naaee.org/learning/eelearn/eelearn-3-research-and-evaluation

Harmon, Elena. (2019). The Great Nonprofit Evaluation Reboot: A New Approach Every Staff Member Can Understand. Pleasant View, Tennessee: CharityChannel Press.

Patton, Michael Quinn. (2008). Utilization Focused Evaluation (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications.