



A “FLEXI-SCHOOL” MODEL *with* 100-acres to expand a student’s horizons

TAKE ROOT
NATURE SCHOOL

Although Forest Schools have been very popular throughout Scandinavia for over fifty years, they did not begin appearing in Canada until the early 2000s.

Many know Willowgrove’s 100-acre farm as the home of Willowgrove Day Camp, or as a favourite field trip destination for school groups. However, you may be surprised to learn that it also houses Stouffville and Markham’s first-ever Nature School.

Willowgrove first opened their Nature School in 2020. The school provided a full-time, outdoor learning program for children from ages 5-10. However, as it enters its fourth year, Willowgrove’s Take Root Nature School has now decided to transition to a part-time program, offering a unique “Flexi-school” model specifically designed to work in tandem with a student’s public, private, or home-schooling.

Covered under the Education Act, “flexi-schooling” or “Flexible School Attendance” is a regulation that allows children to attend school in a part-time capacity as long as the guardian has received written permission from the school’s Principal. It is the same concept that has allowed children to be pulled out of class for competitive sports, or professional arts opportunities for decades, and it is becoming an increasingly popular option for many Ontario families interested in alternative-education - especially since it means that students can now spend part of their school week learning on a 100-acre farm.

The Nature School’s move to a part-time learning model was primarily based on increasing accessibility. Many families

who feel that their students would excel in alternative-education models simply cannot afford full time, private education. Therefore, Willowgrove’s Take Root Nature School has created a unique model that offers a variety of flexible enrolment options.

Nature School students can now attend afternoon programs on Tuesdays, full day classes on Wednesday, and/or morning classes on Thursdays. There are also seasonal enrollment options which allow a student to ease into outdoor learning, meaning that a family can now sign up for Fall programming without needing to commit to Winter, or Spring. This intentional flexibility allows families to fully customize their student’s learning, placing the focus on whatever options will most benefit the child.

“Our daughter is thriving.” Shared Daniel, a Nature School parent. “Socially, mentally, emotionally, academically - and we know the team and environment at Willowgrove are a huge reason why.”

That’s because Willowgrove’s team of educators come from many diverse educational backgrounds and teaching experiences. Each specializes in outdoor education, bringing equal passions for engaging students with inquiry-based, explorative learning opportunities, as well as about connecting children with nature.

Imagine building shelters in an old-growth woodlot to learn about structures, engineering natural materials, and simply forming new ways of seeing the world. Or learning first-hand about the many wild animals that pass through Willowgrove’s

diverse ecosystems by spotting Wild Turkeys in the apple orchard, or examining coyote tracks in the mud. That is the unique benefit of an intimate, outdoor classroom: It focuses on the whole child, and works to integrate everyday learning into nature with unique, first-hand experiences.

In addition to Take Root Nature School’s programming, Willowgrove also offers Take Root’s Parent & Tot program. Whereas the Nature School is designed for children ages 5-10, Parent and Tots is designed for children ages 1-4, alongside their caregivers. Each week, Willowgrove’s parents and tots are guided through a series of activities, nature walks, stories, and crafts, all with themed adventures like “TREEmendous Trees”, “Into the Garden,” and “Farmyard Friends.” This fun and engaging program focuses on connecting you with your toddler in nature, alongside other like-minded families.

As we know, learning takes many forms. Nature School, or Forest School learning, is a unique way for your child to develop a relationship with nature at an early age. These exploratory, nature-based programs provide part-time, affordable ways to enhance your child’s learning, develop confidence and social skills, and help to integrate their core subject learning into everyday life.

If you are interested in expanding your student’s classroom, a world of wonder awaits your child at Stouffville’s own Take Root Nature School. To enroll for 2023’s fall programs, or for more information, be sure to check out willowgrove.ca/nature-school.