

Ripple Effects of Pima County Connecting Children to Nature



Photo Credit: Pima County Connecting Children to Nature

Prepared by:

Erin Allaman, Ph.D. *Director of Learning & Evaluation, Co-Director of Research, Children & Nature Network*

Scott Chazdon, Ph.D., *Evaluation Consultant, Chazdon Evaluation Consulting*

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Appreciations

The successful completion of this Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) report relied on the contributions of several key individuals. Foremost, thank you to the community leaders who shared their experience and insights during the REM session.

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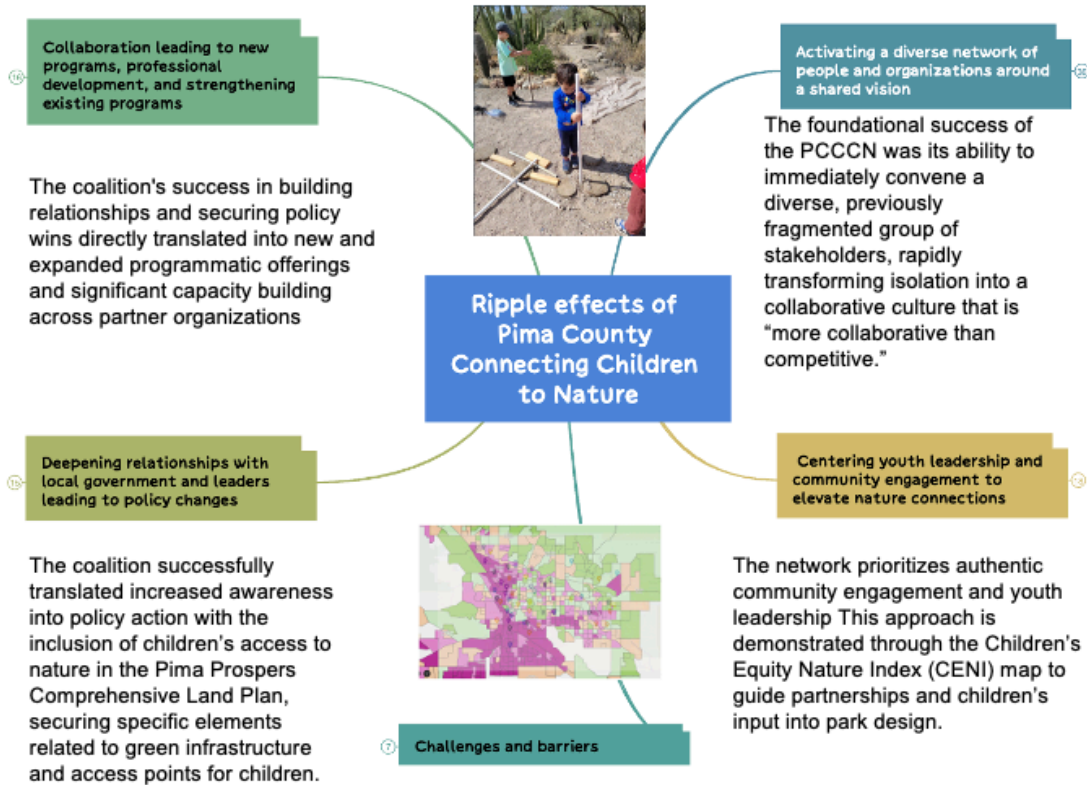
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Ripple Effects Mapping summary graphic

Ripple Effects of Pima County Connecting Children to Nature

In 2022, Pima County Connecting Children to Nature (PCCCN), a Tucson, Arizona coalition focused on equitable early childhood nature access, joined the Cities Connecting to Nature early childhood cohort, followed by a more intensive two years of technical assistance and seed funding through the Nature Everywhere Communities initiative. In 2025, PCCCN participated in a Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) evaluation process to document and understand the impacts of their systems change approach and extensive nature connections work. The following core impact themes emerged from the process.

"I was blown away by the department heads and city representatives that are engaged and supportive. I'm seeing that it is resonating with folks across demographics."



"Having a Community of Practice for Nature and Early Childhood happening and operating is special ...and has led to projects being created and more referrals to existing programs."

Background

Pima County Connecting Children to Nature (PCCCN) is a coalition of partners in Tucson, Arizona, who believe in the importance of children’s access to nature, the benefits of nature-based learning and experiences and the need to cultivate a love and appreciation for the unique Sonoran Desert ecosystem. Specifically focused on early childhood nature access, the founding partners, United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona, Prescott College Center for Nature and Place, and Pima County Conservation Lands & Resources, established a vision of “safe and equitable access to nature for every child in our community” that inspired organizations across multiple sectors to take action.

In 2022, Pima County joined the Cities Connecting Children to Nature (CCCN) early childhood cohort to advance early childhood nature connections.¹ Through participation in the early childhood community of practice, Pima County conducted a landscape scan to understand stakeholders, assets and opportunities to expand early childhood nature access. PCCCN partners also began developing the Children's Equity Nature Index (CENI), a geographic information system (GIS) mapping tool to understand how children’s access to nature varied across their community.² The coalition shared a commitment to bringing the multiple benefits of early childhood nature connection to all children in their community, recognizing that these benefits include better fetal growth and improved birth weights, reduction in nearsightedness, improved social-emotional wellbeing, improved cognitive functioning and development, increased academic outcomes and the promotion of pro-environmental behavior.³

Following PCCCN’s engagement in the early childhood cohort, the CCCN initiative evolved into the Nature Everywhere Communities initiative, a national network launched in 2023 by the Children & Nature Network, the National League of Cities, and KABOOM!. The Nature Everywhere Communities initiative now reaches 100 communities in the United States. Pima County renewed its engagement in the initiative, receiving 2 years of technical assistance, seed funding and participation in a peer-learning network. During this time frame, PCCCN finalized the CENI index, engaging a wide range of institutional leaders and community members. The City of

¹ The Children & Nature Network. Equity Mapping: Young Children & Nature. <https://www.childrenandnature.org/resources/equity-mapping-resource-guide-for-young-childrens-access-to-nature/>

² City of Tucson (2024) Children’s Equity Nature Index (CENI). <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/0d2aeaf26bd342stakeholdersandparticipation649932f5c017c1c5b5> learning its, PCCCN's Landscape Scan conducted

³ Pima County Connecting Children to Nature Community Assessment and Implementation Plan (2025) https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MfS_p2aL0i1B3yi3zQVHugUxyB-3FXdX/view?usp=sharing

Tucson Parks and Recreation department, First Things First and the Wilderness Society joined the core team to help lead the coalition. The PCCCN grew to include 22 members on the steering committee and a coalition with more than 60 diverse stakeholders. These groups and organizations were identified in a landscape scan conducted by the PCCCN in the fall of 2022 and updated in July 2025.

As of 2025, the steering committee includes representatives from Pima County Public Library, Pima Early Education Program scholarships (PEEPs), Tucson Clean and Beautiful, Child & Family Resources, Tucson Regional Educator Collaborative (TREC), the Children’s Museum of Tucson, and Storm to Shade, the City of Tucson’s green stormwater infrastructure program. This coalition brings together a wide variety of groups working on initiatives and efforts that intersect with children in nature, climate resilience, environmental justice and nature-based play and education (see Appendix A for a list of partners). Building on United Way’s leadership in early childhood systems since 2001, PCCCN takes a systems-change approach to shifting the conditions that hold children’s inequitable access to nature in place.⁴

Pima County Connecting Children to Nature (PCCCN)’s achievements from the initiative include:

- **Securing policy and infrastructure commitments:** The coalition successfully influenced high-level regional policy by embedding specific language on access to nature into the Pima Prospers Comprehensive Land Plan.⁵
- **Extensive youth and community outreach:** The network established a model for authentic community engagement by directly reaching over 500 children through Family Resource Centers and home-visiting programs. The City of Tucson Parks and Recreation department also piloted youth engagement by involving 80 K-3 students in a park playground design charette, ensuring project outcomes reflect community needs.
- **Capacity building and training for educators:** PCCCN launched the Nurture Through Nature Community of Practice (COP), providing approximately 50 educators with nature-based professional development and creating demonstration sites for early childhood nature connection.

⁴ Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). The water of systems change. FSG, Boston. https://www.fsg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Water-of-Systems-Change_rc.pdf

⁵ Pima County Board of Supervisors (Author), Pima Prospers 2025: Comprehensive Plan Update. <https://www.pima.gov/3368/Pima-Prospers-2025>

In 2025, the Nature Everywhere Communities initiative invited PCCCN to participate in a Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) evaluation process to uplift their systems change approach and extensive early childhood nature connections and nature exploration area park improvements. Pima County was one of five communities across the United States that participated in this evaluation process.

About the Ripple Effects Mapping process

Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) is an evaluation method that engages a range of program participants to retrospectively and visually map the chain of effects resulting from a program or initiative. The REM process combines elements of Appreciative Inquiry,⁶ mind mapping, group interviewing and qualitative data analysis.⁷

On October 17 and 21, 2025, a group of 10 people from PCCCN's member organizations came together for REM sessions in two virtual sessions. The sessions were facilitated by Erin Allaman, Director of Learning & Evaluation at the Children & Nature Network. At the beginning of the sessions, participants paired up to interview each other in virtual breakout rooms, using the following Appreciative Inquiry questions:

- Please share a story about one or more highlights or successes that emerged from PCCCN initiatives and what you think were the key elements of success.
- Please tell me about new or deepened connections with others (individuals, communities, organizations, educational institutions, government, philanthropic) you made as a result of your involvement with PCCCN? What did these connections lead to?
- Please share a story about changes in policies, practices, programming, funding or natural or built spaces that emerged from PCCCN and what you think were the key elements of success.
- What unexpected things did you observe in the community that contributed to the success of PCCCN?

After the interviews, a representative from each pair reported the two most important stories they had heard during the interview process. In the week between sessions,

⁶ Appreciative Inquiry is a strengths-based organizational development process, increasingly used in evaluation, that involves the art and practice of asking questions that build on the successful, effective and energizing experiences of those involved with a program. For an overview see https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/appreciative_inquiry

⁷ More information about the Ripple Effects Mapping process can be found at https://extension.umn.edu/community-developmentZoom_virtual_sessions/ripple-effect-mapping

the facilitator brainstormed a list of core impact themes that fit the stories reported by participants. In the second session, the facilitator led a discussion of these core impact themes, editing the theme titles and sometimes moving stories that better fit one theme more than another. During this group reflection, participants also shared additional examples and stories to add to the ripple map. Finally, participants discussed some of the challenges that had arisen during the grant process. These challenges were added as a core theme on the ripple map.

After the session, all the information from the interview sheets was added to the draft map. Once all data was added, the map was reviewed and edited by the PCCCN project manager.

The core impact themes emerging from the interview process were:

1. Activating a diverse network of people and organizations around a shared vision
2. Centering youth leadership and community engagement to elevate nature connections
3. Deepening relationships with local government and leaders, leading to policy changes
4. Collaboration leading to new programs, professional development and strengthening existing programs
5. Challenges and barriers

The remainder of this report is organized around these five themes with narrative examples from the ripple effects map, including statements shared by REM session participants. Images of each section of the ripple effects map are in Appendix B.

Findings organized by theme

Activating a diverse network of people and organizations around a shared vision

The PCCCN network has created a highly effective environment for making personal and professional connections grounded in a shared commitment to connecting children to nature. Several participants in the Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) session emphasized that the relationships built through this network have made the work more collaborative than competitive, enhancing the capacity of individual organizations. As participants in the REM session considered the importance of this

networking, they recognized that the initial connections broadened their scope and understanding of people already engaged in this work, helping to break down professional silos within Pima County.

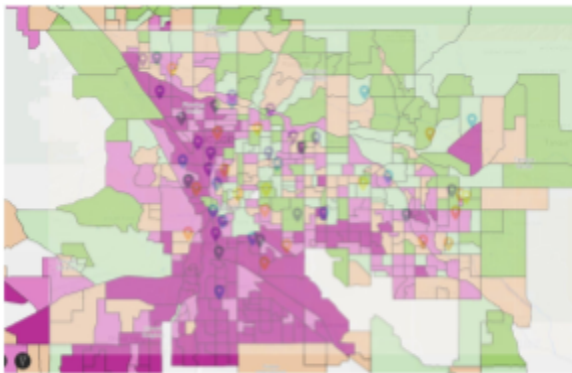
The feeling of finding this community was profound for REM participants. For example, a group member shared: “I think for me, I didn't know so many people cared about the young children in our community and all the work taking place to prop up connecting children to nature. It was unexpected to see how widespread the work already was that was taking place in this area.” This feeling was echoed by a veteran member: “Ten years ago, I felt lonely not knowing others doing this work, and now I know there are so many people passionate about it and working towards this together.”

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This realization fostered immediate collaboration, leading to more networking and program exchanges with other organizations and nonprofits that were already involved with nature play. The shared passion made the networking feel natural: “Everyone I talk to is so passionate about this vision and work; the networking feels so organic. It's really beautiful, with so much negativity happening in the world. At that first convening, we weren't really sure anyone would show up. But everyone came through and committed to getting involved. It was incredible.”

Through its networking activities, PCCCN has created leverage for partners to align resources and enhance strategic planning. Several participants shared that the seed funding from the Nature Everywhere Communities initiative was instrumental, supporting three years of work and providing the organizational structure to apply for a systems-change grant. This investment, combined with the focus on building trust

and agreeing on a vision, allowed the group to move forward, “Essentially, being in a good place to springboard forward.”



Children's Equity Nature Index

Another robust theme from the REM session was the strategic alignment of efforts, particularly the use of the Children's Equity Nature Index (CENI) map to prioritize focus areas. City of Tucson Parks and Recreation, for instance, used the coalition's equity map

to help select two parks for focus, enabling them to integrate existing funding into the initiative's goals. Addressing service gaps, the Nurture Through Nature Community of Practice (COP) began strategically using the equity map to recruit mini-grant recipients for early childhood education (ECE) settings, prioritizing sites in high-need areas. The approach aims to create "more 'demonstration sites' for others to better understand how we do this in the desert."

REM participants also shared how, through the network, organizations have deepened their understanding of the policy landscape. Also, the opportunity to submit comments to Pima Prospers helped legitimize children's access to nature as a public policy topic. Finding opportunities and avenues for action provided motivation and affirmation to PCCCN participants. The partnerships are also driving new strategic alignment, engaging new supporters, informing policy and aligning programs.

Centering youth leadership and community engagement to elevate nature connections

Taking a highly intentional approach to community engagement, PCCCN partners prioritized the voices of children and residents to ensure that the vision and resulting projects accurately reflect community needs and assets. Several participants in the REM session emphasized that the PCCCN initiative works hard to engage with community members directly, ensuring they are "capturing the voices of the people we are working on behalf of, instead of deciding what they need for them, which is wonderful."

"We worked hard to ask the right questions. There's a lot of will in our community to work towards these efforts and we are working hard to capture that will and engage with the community."

Insights gained from community engagement continue to inform the development of language for the Children's Bill of Rights (COBOR). The network's strategy ensures that activities are being led/directed by community needs and assets, building upon what is already taking place within the region rather than imposing external solutions.

A key implementation of this strategy is the direct involvement of children in park redesign projects with City of Tucson Parks and Recreation. For example, a group member shared that a highly successful collaboration involved nature playground design charrettes with K-3 students from a neighboring school. In this process, the children shared their ideas, which were integrated into the draft designs, and they were then invited back to vote on the final concepts. The REM participant noted the powerful outcome of this engagement: "The kids were so excited to share their

ideas. We made sure their ideas came through in the draft designs and then took those designs back to them to vote. They were beyond engaged, and I'm sure will be the park's biggest fans, because we showed we cared by asking them." This direct youth input affirmed that children often desire simple, imaginative elements, such as climbing rocks and splashing in puddles, a finding that validated developmental research.



Design charrettes with students
Photo courtesy PCCN

Through its networking activities, PCCCN has created multiple channels for input, including an initial parent survey shared at community events, a subsequent youth survey disseminated through the network, and physical dot-sticker surveys conducted at community centers and schools. For example, dot-sticker surveys were used at the Southside Community School and Quincie Douglas Community Center to gather visual, low-barrier community input on priorities. Furthermore, the Children's Equity Nature Index (CENI) map is strategically used to creatively disseminate information and guide the selection of schools for partnership. As one school liaison noted, by reaching out to multiple school site councils, they can learn about specific community needs and share information at events, which makes it easier for parents to participate.

Several REM session participants shared that the idea of nature play and exploration is currently resonating widely, leading to increased requests from parents, teachers and the public for more information and training. This collective interest confirmed a major opportunity for the network: "It seems like the idea of nature play and exploration is in the air, and parents, teachers and the public are

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requesting more information and training. This team can channel that energy and interest in a way where everyone can participate and benefit from it." This wave of public interest and input is already manifesting in program changes.

For example, a session participant shared that the Children's Museum Tucson (CMT) engaged with a local school from an underrepresented community through a design lab. This collaboration informed CMT's own nature-based play development

and elevated the concept regionally, prompting teachers to reach out to learn more. As the participant noted, “A member of the public reached out for more information at the convening. And it's nice to notice how engaged the public is and to keep the momentum going.”

For PCCCN, incorporating CENI mapping data, engaging parents and involving youth input extends beyond events and surveys to intentional outreach.

For example, a school liaison reached out to multiple school site councils to learn about specific school community needs and

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sharing information at events to reach parents in high-priority neighborhoods. This approach ensures that the network is responsive to specific neighborhood needs, as evidenced by a collaboration where members of the Palo Verde Neighborhood reached out to work on a nature-based playground at Catalina High School Park. This ongoing process of listening, designing and responding confirms that the PCCCN is actively centering youth and community leadership.

Deepening relationships with local government and leaders, leading to policy changes

Strengthened partnerships with local governmental entities are translating awareness into high-level policy engagement and securing institutional support for connecting children to nature. Several participants in the REM session emphasized the significance of an April 2025 convening, where the coalition presented its ‘why’ to elected officials and government leaders. This strong presentation uplifted and affirmed PCCCN’s work, demonstrating its relevance to broader community goals, including public health, economic mobility and mental health outcomes. This event served as a galvanizing moment for the entire community.

As participants in the REM session considered the importance of this high-level engagement, they noted a commitment to “plant seeds” for future policy change, such as through presentations to city commissions.

Through its networking activities, PCCCN created strong connections that directly influenced regional planning documents. For example, attending a Nature Everywhere Communities Vision Lab sparked interest and buy-in among local leaders to the coalition’s goals of children’s access to nature and climate resiliency. This resulted in specific additions to the 10-year Pima Prospers Comprehensive

Land Plan, ensuring the plan would promote childhood nature connections through climate-resilient infrastructure. These additions are:

- 2.E Neighborhoods & Communities Element - Ensure Access to nature and greenspaces in the built and social environments across Pima County, with special attention and focus on underserved communities.
- 3.D Flood Control & Drainage Element - Design green infrastructure including retention basins, bioswales, rain gardens and other stormwater features — to also serve as nature access points and environmental learning spaces for children.

This work formalizes the vision for children’s equitable access to nature within a 10-year policy plan.

Several participants shared that the initiative has deepened its relationships across governmental bodies. While initial partnerships with the county were strong, PCCCN is now making greater headway with other local municipalities and the City of Tucson. This network not only facilitated connections with leaders, like county department heads and elected officials’ staff, but also enabled members to strengthen collaborations with other county departments, including early childhood, public health, land use, transportation and libraries. PCCCN also provided information about the CENI map to the Pima Association of Governments to inform the regional active transportation plan and to request policy inclusion that supports neighborhood connections to nature.

This consistent engagement with local government ensures that, as general awareness of climate change and early childhood issues grows, the coalition is well-positioned to leverage these new policy frameworks. As one REM session participant noted, “As we talk more about this, more people are becoming aware and wanting to connect to the work.” REM attendees emphasized the importance of maintaining this political momentum and are confident that adopting a Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights (COBOR) will help sustain their efforts.

Collaboration leading to new programs and professional development and strengthening existing programs

The PCCCN steering committee and coalition members have created a dynamic environment where relationship building directly translates into new programming, specialized staff training and the strengthening of existing community resources. This theme captures the programmatic ripples generated by the cross-sector connections established by the PCCCN initiative.

A core activity of the coalition over the past few years has been the successful formation and operation of the Nurture Through Nature Community of Practice (COP). By leveraging existing funding from First Things First, members of the PCCCN worked to integrate new, nature-based professional development into United Way's Great Expectations for Teachers, Children, Families & Communities early childhood education professional development initiative.

Several participants in the REM session emphasized that sustained connections among people at convenings are highly beneficial, leading to the creation of projects and direct referrals to existing work. PCCCN has created a successful platform not only for enrolling individual teachers from early childhood education (ECE) sites but also for working with several teachers from a single site, enabling them to apply for a mini-grant to enhance their outdoor environment. These efforts prioritize sites in high-need areas with the intention of creating "more 'demonstration sites' for others to better understand how we do this in the desert."



Desert nature play
Photo Courtesy of PCCCN

Collaboration has rippled out into new and strengthened partnerships. For example, nature-smart library programming is highly valued by families, bringing "joy and appreciation to families that they share with their networks" and encouraging use of greenspace at the library. The partnerships also deepened existing relationships, such as connecting with the Living Streets Alliance, thereby strengthening engagement with the branch's local school community and neighborhood.

"Having a Community of Practice for Nature and Early Childhood happening and operating is really special and exciting. The connection that happens between people at our convenings is really special and has led to projects being created, referrals to existing work and programs."

Another ripple is the proliferation of specialized, nature-based professional development opportunities. The partnerships are actively building stronger connections among professionals in this area, including the Tucson Regional

Educator Collaborative (TREC) at the University of Arizona College of Education. TREC is looking to incorporate nature into its grant application for early childhood professional development and is actively seeking deeper connections with other partners doing similar work.

Collaboration has also strengthened program enrollment through direct referrals and shared grant applications. A REM participant shared that their biggest connection was facilitating child and family classes at local Family Resource Centers (FRCs), which was a “direct result of folks looking for people teaching nature connection/play.” This has led to new nature-based programming and literacy events at FRCs. Through the network, the Children's Museum Tucson (CMT) also received new funding for the "Harvesting Health" program, which now runs monthly as an extension of their existing Nature Niños Program and teaches children about native plants, foods and nutrition.

Partnerships are also driving forward capital projects and strategic planning. For example, Pima County Environmental Education conducted a “Nature in Your Neighborhood” program at Cherry Avenue Recreation Center (City of Tucson Parks and Recreation), which leveraged the network's expertise to involve partners in playground design at Southside Community School. The Parks and Recreation department noted that while extensive youth engagement has only been concrete in one instance so far, they have a large inclusive playground project in the initial design phase, where they plan to replicate that successful community involvement model. REM participants valued both the new and strengthened programming and the connections themselves, which ensure continuous program evolution and inspire new nature-based infrastructure designs.

Challenges and barriers

PCCCN has created significant positive momentum and interest in early childhood nature connection across professional relationships, community engagement, institutional leadership support and the advancement of early childhood programs and infrastructure. At the end of the REM session, attendees were asked what ongoing and emerging challenges and barriers they experienced. They shared that the success of the PCCCN network has simultaneously introduced some operational and communication hurdles. The enthusiastic commitment of the members — who are largely “yes people” — can make it challenging to maintain focus and determine direction.

The large number of interested partners — 22 steering committee members and 60 network partners — creates a need and impetus for clarity in the collective vision, goals, and approach to help define priorities and direction. One recommendation that emerged from the REM process is to establish clearer guidance for the coalition: “The group is getting a lot of people very interested. This is a wonderful, beautiful thing. This can also make it difficult to pick a direction. Being clear on our values and goals and making sure decisions align with that.” This lack of clarity contributes to

operational issues, including challenges with knowing who is doing what and who has added things to the agenda, as well as ensuring efficient communication flow.

“This work is ongoing, we’re in some ways still in a building stage. I was already connected within the early childhood education world of things and understand how this realm works, but wasn’t as aware of what others were involved in and doing—so now I’ve learned about how this work fits into a much broader coalition.”

Through its networking activities, PCCCN has created a wide-reaching coalition, yet this expansion reveals that many in the broader community remain unaware of the work. Several participants shared that despite the connections made within the

coalition, “there are still so many that are unaware that this work is taking place.” This leads to the overarching challenge of communication, both internal and external, which is primarily limited by capacity. Addressing gaps in external communication, REM session participants suggested setting up a public-facing campaign or website to clarify their message to the audience they are trying to reach.

Another challenge is positioning nature access as essential when many people are struggling with basic needs. In this context, “‘children and nature’ seems like a luxury.” PCCCN leaders recognize that to overcome this perception, they need to communicate the work within the context of other systemic issues, such as mental health and economic mobility, reinforcing that these issues are interconnected. This requires growing both the mental and lived connections between access to nature and basic community well-being.

The network has created strong connections to larger systems and initiatives, and there is still room for growth. For example, a group member shared that the coalition could do more work on climate justice and explore ways to connect with and engage youth in the Arizona Climate Action Coalition. Another participant noted the ongoing nature of this process: “We are working on impacting this — it is embedded in this initiative’s work. Once we do see it take place, the elements for success will include how it fits into what is already taking place and imbues our work into larger-scale systems that already exist.”

Summary and key takeaways

Through Ripple Effects Mapping (REM), this evaluation documented the extensive community impacts of the Pima County Connecting Children to Nature (PCCCN) initiative, a robust coalition aligning governmental entities, educational institutions and nonprofit organizations. The network’s core goal is to increase equitable access

to nature for all children in the region, maximizing the benefits of outdoor experiences through coordinated action, resource alignment and policy advocacy.

The ripple effects map was developed in collaboration with PCCCN members. Four core impact themes emerged, demonstrating how the partnership is creating system-wide change in Pima County. The paragraphs below summarize the key findings related to these themes.

Activating a diverse network of people and organizations around a shared vision: The foundational success of the PCCCN was its ability to immediately convene a diverse, previously fragmented group of stakeholders into a network culture that is “more collaborative than competitive.” This process secured seed funding, which supported community engagement and the completion of planning tools to prioritize underserved communities. Strengthened relationships are also leading to policy and programmatic successes across Tucson and Pima County.

Centering youth leadership and community engagement to elevate nature connections: The network prioritizes authentic community engagement and youth leadership. This approach is demonstrated through intentional mechanisms like the development of a Children's Bill of Rights (COBOR) and the use of the Children's Equity Nature Index (CENI) map to guide partnerships. The direct involvement of young residents in park planning highlighted natural elements children prefer (climbing rocks, splashing) and set a precedent for engaging community and youth in planning processes.

Deepening relationships with local government and leaders, leading to policy changes: PCCCN successfully translated increased awareness into policy frameworks. Advocacy efforts culminated in the formal integration of children's access to nature into the Pima Prospers Comprehensive Land Plan, securing specific elements related to green infrastructure and nature access points for children. This work has been uplifted and affirmed by elected officials and departmental heads at public convenings. That has led to strong political support and deepened collaborations across municipal and county agencies, including early childhood programs, the county health department and the library system, providing the PCCCN with a solid institutional foundation for future systems change.

Collaboration leading to new programs and professional development and strengthening existing programs: The coalition's success in building relationships translated into new and expanded programmatic offerings and capacity building across partner organizations. By pooling resources and expertise, the network developed innovative programs, like a nature-smart libraries initiative that embedded nature-based learning into library systems and inspired school partnerships. The

Nurture Through Nature Community of Practice (COP) provides nature-oriented professional development for educators and staff. Collaboration has strengthened existing offerings, increasing the reach and impact of nature-based curricula in schools and early childhood centers. This integrated approach ensures that systems change in Pima County includes accessible, high-quality programming and a workforce equipped to sustain equitable nature connections for children.

Challenges and barriers: Sustaining the rapid growth and high level of interest generated by the PCCCN initiative poses several key operational and strategic challenges. Due to the large number of engaged partners, the coalition faces internal hurdles related to focus and communication. Externally, the network must address the perception that “children and nature’ seems like a luxury,” necessitating strategic communication that links nature access to broader societal issues, like public health and climate justice. Furthermore, while system connections are strong, fully embedding the PCCCN vision into existing governmental systems remains an ongoing process.

In summary, the PCCCN initiative successfully leveraged its robust, cross-sector partnership to drive early-stage systems change. By activating a diverse and committed network, the coalition moved from addressing organizational isolation to influencing high-level policy, resulting in the formalization of equitable nature access within the Pima Prospers Comprehensive Land Plan. This success is founded on the strategy of centering youth leadership and using specialized tools, such as the CENI Nature Equity Map, to guide outreach and program expansion. The PCCCN has created a model for regional partners to increase community health and climate resiliency by establishing a unified vision for children’s access to nature.

Reflections from PCCCN’s core team and project manager

Tucson, located within Pima County, is often described as a large urban area that feels like a small town. Part of what makes Pima County a great place to live is its people, many of whom are connected by relationships that sometimes span generations. Our community is also characterized by a culture of collaboration and we have many examples of coalitions and collective impact work, of people from diverse backgrounds, perspectives and life experiences coming together to make Pima County a better place for all of our citizens. This is what made it so effortless for the PCCCN to get the right partners to the table in the early days — and to grow the coalition. It is also what made it possible to establish a shared vision with relative

ease. And in the spirit of “nothing for us without us,” the PCCCN members prioritized youth leadership and community engagement from the very beginning.

The values of the coalition members, paired with our relationship-based approach and our community’s culture of collaboration, were key drivers in our successes and progress. The REM process confirmed that our core values were the right ones to lead to the results we’re trying to achieve.

Looking ahead, our coalition will continue to solidify our work, make progress on our goals and improve our processes. The challenges and barriers surfaced through the REM process will provide us with improvements — and guide our attention and efforts.

I want to extend my deepest gratitude for all members of the core team and the steering committee, all of whom volunteered to be part of this movement and helped build it into what it is today. The leadership and vision of Melissa Mundt, Chair of PCCCN, was critical to our progress and success. Melissa’s passion, connections, and contributions to the coalition can’t be understated.

Monica Brinkerhoff, Associate Vice President, Early Childhood Education at United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona

Appendix A – PCCCN partner information

Arizona Youth Climate Coalition <https://www.azyouthclimate.org/>

Children’s Equity Nature Index (CENI) Pima County Connecting Children to Nature (PCCCN) Initiative
<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/0d2aeaf26bd342stakeholdersand>

Harvesting Health Program. Children's Museum Tucson (CMT)
<https://childrensmuseumtucson.org/>

Nurture Through Nature Community of Practice (COP): United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona / Great Expectations <https://unitedwaytucson.org/education/>
(Under Education Programs)

Nature Created Play <https://www.naturecreatedplay.com/>

Prescott College Center for Nature and Place
<https://prescott.edu/local-and-global-centers/center-for-nature-and-place/>

Pima County Conservation Lands & Resources
<https://www.pima.gov/3209/Conservation-Lands-Resources>

Pima County Public Library Nature-Smart Libraries Programming
<https://www.library.pima.gov/>

Pima Early Education Program Scholarships (PEEPs)
<https://www.pima.gov/975/Pima-Early-Education-Program-Scholarship>

Pima Prospers 2025: Comprehensive Plan Update Pima County Board of Supervisors / Pima County Planning and Development Services
<https://www.pima.gov/3368/Pima-Prospers-2025>

Storm to Shade City of Tucson <https://climateaction.tucsonaz.gov/pages/gsi>

Tucson Clean and Beautiful <https://tucsoncleanandbeautiful.org/>

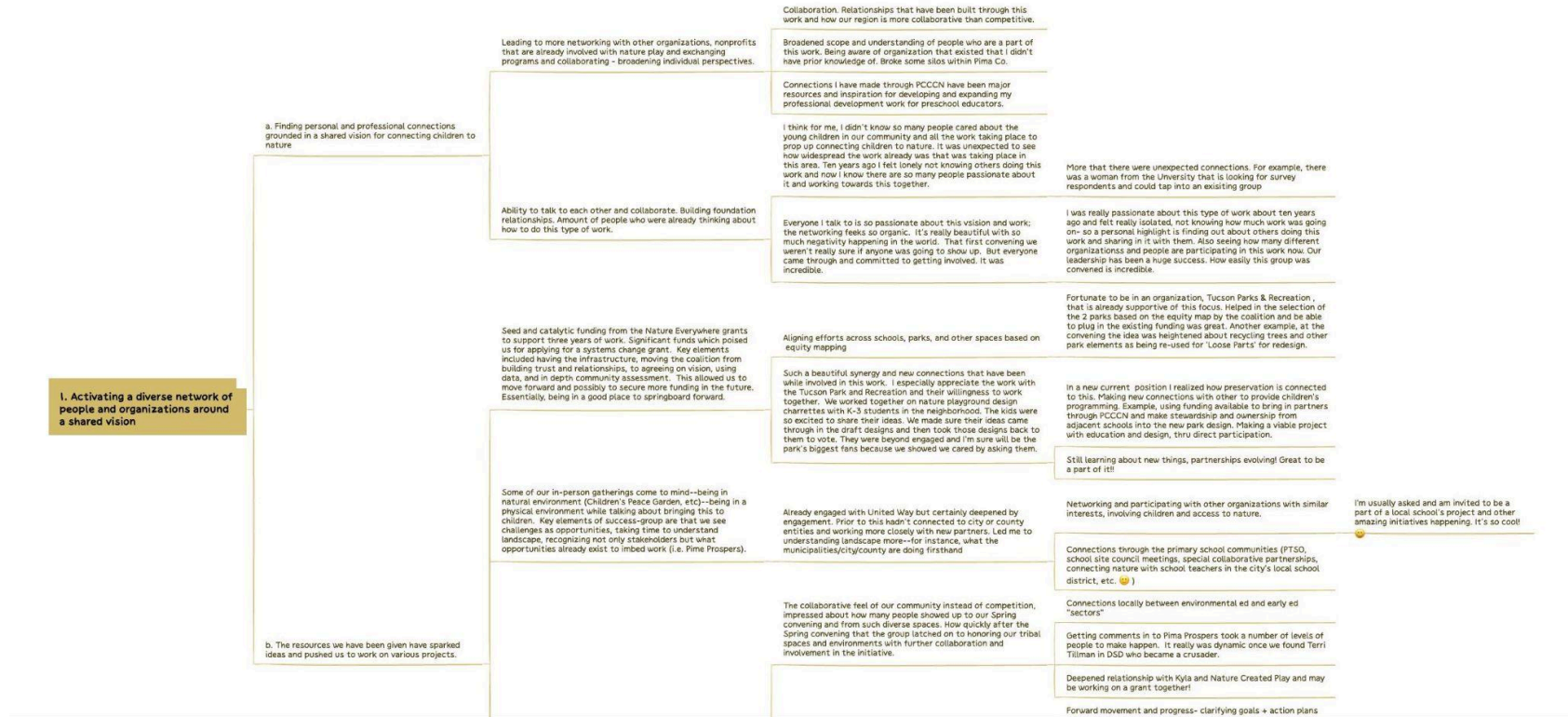
Tucson Regional Educator Collaborative (TREC) University of Arizona College of Education <https://trecarizona.org/>

United Way of Tucson and Southern Arizona <https://unitedwaytucson.org/>

Wilderness Society <https://www.wilderness.org/>

Appendix B – Sections of the ripple effects map

Activating a diverse network of people and organizations around a shared vision



Activating a diverse network of people and organizations around a shared vision, cont.

1. Activating a diverse network of people and organizations around a shared vision

<p>b. The resources we have been given have sparked ideas and pushed us to work on various projects.</p>	<p>building trust and relationships, to agreeing on vision, using data, and in depth community assessment. This allowed us to move forward and possibly to secure more funding in the future. Essentially, being in a good place to springboard forward.</p> <p>Some of our in-person gatherings come to mind--being in natural environment (Children's Peace Garden, etc)--being in a physical environment while talking about bringing this to children. Key elements of success-group are that we see challenges as opportunities, taking time to understand landscape, recognizing not only stakeholders but what opportunities already exist to imbue work (i.e. Pima Prosper).</p> <p>Some highlights include greater coalition membership, policy changes, improved outdoor learning environments, access to resources to inform our work, aligning existing resources with the work of the committee, CEN- Children's Equity Nature Index. Key elements of success are having a shared vision and being clear about our goals. People in Tucson are already poised to collaborate, early members already had a lot of connections and could get started right away. Many connections were already formed to build from.</p>	<p>Such a beautiful synergy and new connections that have been while involved in this work. I especially appreciate the work with the Tucson Park and Recreation and their willingness to work together. We worked together on nature playground design charrettes with K-3 students in the neighborhood. The kids were so excited to share their ideas. We made sure their ideas came through in the draft designs and then took those designs back to them to vote. They were beyond engaged and I'm sure will be the park's biggest fans because we showed we cared by asking them.</p> <p>Already engaged with United Way but certainly deepened by engagement. Prior to this hadn't connected to city or county entities and working more closely with new partners. Led me to understanding landscape more--for instance, what the municipalities/city/county are doing firsthand</p> <p>The collaborative feel of our community instead of competition, impressed about how many people showed up to our Spring convening and from such diverse spaces. How quickly after the Spring convening that the group latched on to honoring our tribal spaces and environments with further collaboration and involvement in the initiative.</p> <p>A highlight is renewed energy and momentum</p> <p>Still in the works... building stronger connections with those who are doing the work. Tucson Regional Educator Collaborative at the University of Arizona College of Education is looking at applying for a grant for early childhood professional development and is looking to incorporate with other people doing professional development for early childhood education with nature as a topic. Making deeper connections with other people who are doing professional development. Steering Committee helps each other learn about other partners' efforts. Key elements: new connections and networking, beginning alignment and putting pieces together.</p> <p>The Nature Equity map is now the foundation for my own team's prioritizing and tracking of programming for underserved communities.</p>	<p>In a new current position I realized how preservation is connected to this. Making new connections with other to provide children's programming. Example, using funding available to bring in partners through FCCCN and make stewardship and ownership from adjacent schools into the new park design. Making a viable project with education and design, thru direct participation.</p> <p>Still learning about new things, partnerships evolving! Great to be a part of it!</p> <p>Networking and participating with other organizations with similar interests, involving children and access to nature.</p> <p>Connections through the primary school communities (PTSO, school site council meetings, special collaborative partnerships, connecting nature with school teachers in the city's local school district, etc.)</p> <p>Connections locally between environmental and early ed "sectors"</p> <p>Getting comments in to Pima Prosper took a number of levels of people to make happen. It really was dynamic once we found Terri Tillman in DSD who became a crusader.</p> <p>Deepened relationship with Kyla and Nature Created Play and may be working on a grant together!</p> <p>Forward movement and progress- clarifying goals + action plans</p> <p>Uplifted by the amount of work taking place within our shared vision</p> <p>Meeting someone who is a powerhouse of knowledge especially in terms of nature-based learning and play</p> <p>Invited Melissa Pludt to present as part of a Science ECHO for early childhood educators, an online program of 6 sessions for about 50 educators.</p> <p>The new program at the Children's Museum is called, Harvesting Health, takes place once a month on Saturday and Sunday, this happens within our existing Nature Ninos Program</p> <p>Estimating that through all of the partnership and programs outreach, specifically First things first funding for family resources centers and home visiting experience and pd cohorts we've reached over 500 kids</p> <p>Pima County Env Ed did a Nature in Your Neighborhood program at Cherry Avenue Recreation Center (Tucson Parks and Recreation) and also invited us to join her program at Southside Community School for playground design (20 kids). Tucson Parks and Rec is progressing in design - install not until spring timeframe.</p> <p>The Southside outreach was more like 80 kids- all K-3rd classes :)</p> <p>Using the Equity map in our recruitment efforts for the mini-grants available to ECE settings through the Nurture Through Nature COP (grants available Vitalist (sp) grant)</p> <p>Tucson Parks & Rec - only one concrete example so far with youth engagement, but we've got a big inclusive playground project at the beginning of design that we'll look to do something similar. We also went at Boo Bash (haloween event) for general engagement on parks.</p> <p>I'm facilitating a "Islands in Nature" class at the Family Resource Centers as a result of this work.</p> <p>I think Alicia mentioned that TREC and Kyla have deepened their partnership and are maybe applying for a grant</p> <p>The Nurture Through Nature COP (Great Expectations) and our work to not only enroll teachers from ECE sites but also work with several teachers from one site so they can apply for a mini-grant to enhance their outdoor environment and create more nature-based play in child care centers and family cc homes. We are prioritizing those sites in high need areas. The hope is to create more "demonstration sites" for others to better understand how we do this in the desert!</p>	<p>I'm usually asked and am invited to be a part of a local school's project and other amazing initiatives happening. It's so cool!</p> <p>yes! they're also supporting my "Saying YES" concert at TU20 which has nature threads</p>
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Centering youth leadership and community engagement to elevate nature connections



2. Centering Youth Leadership and Community Engagement to elevate nature connections

Deepening relationships with local government and leaders, leading to policy changes

	<p>Convening in April, morning session with elected officials and gov. entities stands out as our strong presentation of 'why' and was echoed back and energized by the whole community - including public health, economic mobility, mental health outcomes = all needed and a good moment for the coalition</p>	<p>a. Involvement of governmental entities at policy-making level at the April 2025 convening, seeing PCCCN's work uplifted and affirmed by decision-makers.</p>
	<p>The coalition is presenting at City commissions to "plant seeds" about the work of the PCCCN that will lead to greater awareness and maybe policy change in the future. Also the COBOR passed will be a success and will lead to policy change</p>	
<p>3.D Flood Control & Drainage Element - Design green infrastructure including retention basins, bioswales, rain gardens, and other stormwater features - to also serve as nature access points and environmental learning spaces for children</p>	<p>Comprehensive land plan</p>	
	<p>Increased media attention to climate change specifically as it relates to early childhood. When we started the Prosperity Initiative had just started and now it's a new set of policies that we can lean on. It includes both climate change and early childhood.</p>	<p>b. Pima Prospers Comprehensive land plan includes access to nature. Strong support from the Board of Supervisors in District I. They attended a vision lab and connected with department leaders who came to the spring meeting. Person who was there guided to the resource.</p>
	<p>Pima Prospers Additions included are as follows: 2.E Neighborhoods & Communities Element - Ensure Access to nature and green spaces in the built and social environments across Pima County, with special attention and focus on underserved communities</p>	
	<p>Was surprised to see leadership folks be excited about this work. I was blown away by the department heads, city representatives, etc. that are engaged and supportive. I'm seeing that it is resonating with folks across demographics.</p>	
<p>Pima Association of Governments regional active transportation plan, provided information about CENI and asked if there's anything they can and to policy about connecting neighborhoods to nature</p>	<p>I think the presentations to City Commission meetings should be mentioned</p>	
<p>Pima County uses surveys and data to inform active transportation planning, with recent efforts including a federal Safe Streets for All (SS4A) grant program and a regional RTA Next plan</p>	<p>This work has been a way for me to strengthen relationships and collaborations with other County Depts (PEEPS, PDEQ, RFCD, Health Dept and Libraries).</p>	<p>c. A deepened relationship with the city. We had relationships with the county and Prescott college. Now lots of partners with the city and making more headway for the city connections, including mayor. And then deepening connections with the county to more environmental education programs and development services. There is now language and ideas from the Children and Nature that is part of a 10 year policy plan.</p>
	<p>As we talk more about this, more people are becoming aware and wanting to connect to the work. For example in a meeting this week with a Board of Supervisors staff team I spoke about the work we are doing and they are interested in partnering with us for the upcoming Sonoran Desert Anniversary</p>	

3. Deepening relationships with local government and leaders leading to policy changes

Collaboration leading to new programs and professional development and strengthening existing programs

After attendance at Vision Lab in Austin, TX, having taken copious notes on their programming, I had a renewed, refreshed, reenergized momentum to share with my colleagues here what I had seen at the library in Austin. Amazing to see the efforts in place in that library system and the benefits of the network manifested in their programming.

Here started recruiting and telling library presenter contractors that we are prioritizing nature programming. Made connection with Tucson Unified School District contractor to do programming. For example, tomorrow teaching W is for Worms to learn about importance of worms in the ecosystem. Just seeing how families love nature programming and getting into green space at the library. Brings joy and appreciation to families that they share with their networks.

Connections led to more interest and new potential collaborations. Of our network I leaned into the school connections and the ones that work in my branch's neighborhood. For example, Living Streets alliance and that deepened the relationship with the school community and neighborhood.

Biggest connection for me was facilitating the child & family classes at the Family Resource Centers; direct result of folks looking for people teaching nature connection/play. Strengthened existing connections with others for continued work and forward momentum for Nature Access/Play.

Nature based programming happening at the Family Resource Centers and Nature based literacy events at the resource centers, success from our partnerships within the initiative and relationships built between members.

Nature Created Play working with Sunnyside, Amphi is looking to expand a nature play space at a FRC. (clarify organizations)

Still in the works... building stronger connections with those who are doing the work. Tucson Regional Educator Collaborative at the University of Arizona College of Education is looking at applying for a grant for early childhood professional development and is looking to incorporate with other people doing professional development for early childhood education with nature as a topic. Making deeper connections with other people who are doing professional development. Steering Committee helps each other learn about other partners' efforts. Key elements: new connections and networking, beginning alignment and putting pieces together.

Not a direct connection for Children's Museum Tucson in terms of programming or funding - CMT already doing nature based play. CMT received new funding for "Harvesting Health" program targeting CMOV children focused on native plants and foods. How to cook native foods and introduce nutrition to the Nature Ninos program at CMOV.

a. Growing nature-smart library programming, staff training and school partnerships

b. Having a Community of Practice for Nature and Early Childhood happening and operating is really special and exciting. The connection that happens between people at our convenings is really special and has led to projects being created, referrals to existing work/programs.

4. Collaboration leading to new programs, professional development, and strengthening existing programs

Challenges and barriers

"This work is ongoing, we're in some ways still in a building stage. I was already connected within the ECE world of things and understand how this realm works, but wasn't as aware of what others were involved in and doing- so now I've learned about how this work fits into a much broader coalition. A lot of new connections has been made. I've also realized that despite this, there are still so many that are unaware that this work is taking place."

Not sure I have a story about changes in policies, practices, programming, funding or natural/built spaces right now. We are working on impacting this--it is embedded in this initiative's work--once we do see it take place the elements for success will include how it fits into what is already taking place--imbues our work into larger scale systems that already exist

We've done a good job connecting our work to larger systems and initiatives but could do more around climate justice

People are really struggling now with basic needs and "children and nature" seems like a luxury. We need to talk about access to nature within those other issues- they are all connected. We can grow those mental connections and lived connections. System level changes can move conversation beyond individual priorities and struggles.

communication outward- how to talk to the audience we're trying to reach and communicating message clearly

a. The group is getting a lot of people very interested. This is a wonderful beautiful thing. This also can make it difficult to pick a direction. Being clear on our values and goals and making sure decisions align with that. Something like that needed for this group so we're confident when we say yes or no to something. We're all yes people, and it makes it difficult to know what direction we're heading in. Along with that feeling is that communication piece, knowing who is doing what, who added something on the side, etc. key words: focus and communication

b. Communication internal and external is challenging, largely because of capacity. Challenges we can think of as opportunities- such as setting up public facing campaign website.

5. Challenges and Barriers