

BLUE SKY FUND

FINAL ***Strategic Plan*** ***2021 - 2024***

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1. Introduction

In 2020, Blue Sky Fund embarked on the Strategic Planning process but intentionally paused as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting need to quickly adapt to a new and different working and operating environment. In the midst of the change and reflection the year has afforded us, however, we continued to elevate the discussion around important topics like justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion and the role they play in our goal-setting and strategic planning efforts.

The Strategic Plan has been informed by and developed through collaboration between Board and Staff. The process has also been supported by VCIC's data collection (focus group facilitation) services in order to learn from diverse perspectives necessary to craft impactful, relevant, and meaningful long-term efforts.

In 2020 we affirmed that we must continue to create time and space for purposeful discussion about the critical topics affecting our organization and community. This affirmation underscored the strategic planning process and the forthcoming goals, objectives, and action plan(s) which we are excited to begin implementing now and over the next few years.

2. Strategic Planning Process Overview

The Blue Sky Fund Strategic Plan outlines strategic focus areas, goals, and initiatives determined through analysis and synthesis of information gathered from several sources including the Board of Directors, Staff, and community partners with special expertise in diversity, equity, and inclusion.

This strategic plan is meant to provide guidance and inspiration to Blue Sky Fund's leadership, staff, Board, Funders, and community partners as the organization embarks and lives out its Mission, Vision and Values through its work of providing transformational outdoor experiences for school-aged children across Richmond's most underserved communities.

As part of the strategic planning process, the Board and Staff completed a review of Blue Sky Fund's Mission/Vision Statements and Values and Operating Principles. Board and Staff were also charged with articulating the organization's future direction and goals for the next three (3) years, which will be piloted and implemented as a living, adaptable framework from which to operate and sustain the organization.

3. Organization Overview

a. Who We Are

Blue Sky Fund connects **urban**¹ children of all ages to the natural environments in our region, reaching elementary, middle and high school students through in-school, after-school, weekend and summer programs.

b. What We Do (Mission)

Blue Sky Fund is on a mission to provide transformational experiences for **urban** youth through outdoor education.

c. Why We Do It (Vision)

We will give every young person the opportunity to discover themselves by actively engaging the natural world.

d. Our Values & Operating Principles

Our culture and work is informed by a shared set of values and beliefs, created from within the organization...

- **We value...**
 - *Discovery through learning about nature, spirit, and self.*
- **We value...**
 - *Unity through working together with our team, neighbors, and diverse communities.*
- **We value...**
 - *Respect by how we treat ourselves, others, and the environment.*
- **We value...**
 - *Stewardship by caring for our environment, our community, our volunteers, and our financial resources.*

In carrying out our work, we embrace the following **Operating Principles**:

- We will follow our “Five Finger Agreement”:
 - *Speak encouraging words to one another*
 - *Follow the rules, submit to authority, hold ourselves accountable*
 - *Respect each other and proper professional relationships*
 - *Remain committed to team goals not individual agendas*
 - *Operate our organization and services in ways that are safe for all involved physically, emotionally, and environmentally*

¹ This word is highlighted throughout the document to reflect the fact that Board and Staff have agreed to change it with the support of an organization specializing in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion - such as [VCIC](#). More details are included in goals and initiatives outlined in the following pages.

- We are focused on excellence for the sake of the kids we serve, not the credit we will receive.
- We assume the positive intent of others - always trusting that others are giving their best effort.
- We will love one another when we fail and help one another learn.
- When we need to bring up things that are hard or we are hurt, we will do so humbly and constructively and with readiness to move forward.
- We are responsible for what we say, how we say it, and what we say with our actions.
- We acknowledge that under the banner of grace, consequences will be enforced for our own growth and for the sake of the children we serve.
- We seek cultural awareness with open minds, believing we have much to learn from those we work with and serve.
- We will seek to partner with, collaborate with, and build up other organizations and people, even when it is hard or messy.

e. What Does “Success” Look Like?

The following long-term success milestone questions and answers were developed by the Executive Director and supported by Board & Staff. These helped shape Strategic Planning discussions around goals and initiatives.

1. *What will it look like when we succeed?*
 - a. We will be meeting the needs of the community in a way that is mission-centric and sustainable.
 - b. We will stabilize the organization and establish a strong foundation that is poised for future growth.
 2. *What are programming priorities over the next 3 years?*
 - a. Building out the pipeline between each program to increase the amount of time we have with each individual
 - b. Determining how to measure a common outcome across all 3 programs.
 3. *What do “big wins” look like 3 years from now?*
 - a. More inclusive board and staff culture
 - b. Increased awareness of Blue Sky Funds work in the community
 - c. Increased retention from one program to the next
 - d. Achieved funding sustainability goals
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4. Strategic Focus Areas, Related Goals & Initiatives

Between the Board and Staff, there is an abundance of energy, enthusiasm, and ideas about a variety of different efforts the organization could develop future strategy around.

In an effort to focus that energy, enthusiasm, and those ideas in a way that creates realistic objectives for the Board and Staff to work towards and accomplish over the next 3 years, the strategic plan is organized into four strategic focus areas with accompanying goals and initiatives. These areas are:

Operations: *How do we run the organization?*

Funding: *How do we sustain the organization?*

Education & Programming: *How do we educate & inspire?*

Marketing/PR: *How do we raise awareness?*

Strategic focus areas, the overarching strategic questions they seek to answer, as well as respective goals and initiatives are outlined throughout the next several pages.

OPERATIONS: How do we run the organization?

Staffing/Recruiting (Board, Staff, Volunteers), Culture, Facilities

GOAL 1

STAFFING/RECRUITING: Cultivate an innovative and effective organization that supports Blue Sky Fund's commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion and meets the needs of the community in a way that is sustainable.

GOAL 2

CULTURE: Ensure all Board, Staff, and Volunteers feel that their perspectives and experiences are included and valued.

GOAL 3

FACILITIES: Determine a best plan for Blue Sky Fund's facility needs that provide for the effective delivery of programs and program growth.

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FUNDING: How do we sustain the organization?

Financial Sustainability, Development, Growth & Expansion

The Board and Staff took time to answer the question, “How will we know when we are financially ‘sustainable’?” The following are the answers they have agreed upon:

- Ability to “forward fund” at least 1 year out
- Ability to fund all available programming
- Have funds left at the end of the year (consistently for the next 3 years, regardless of the amount)
- Consideration: Stability and tenure of staff, on the whole, has been a positive for funders and those who participated in VCIC focus groups/surveys
 - *Continuity in ED/DD roles can support sustainability, while acknowledging risks involved in relying too heavily on individual-specific relationships*

GOAL 1

Diversify Income Sources

GOAL 2

Secure and sustain comprehensive and dedicated funding in support of the BSF mission.

EDUCATION & PROGRAMMING: How do we educate and inspire?

Community Partners, Programs, Student & Parent Engagement

GOAL 1

Safely restart and adapt in-person programming in a meaningful way that is kid-centric and addresses current social-emotional needs

GOAL 2

Define and showcase shared impact across all three programs².

GOAL 3

Bridge the gap between programs and beyond (life/career)

²**Board and Staff** agreed upon shared metrics: 1) Provide access to nature and the opportunity to explore the outdoors in a safe and nurturing environment, and 2) Develop character and leadership through outdoor experiences that expand horizons, increase confidence, and build collaboration skills.

MARKETING / PR - How do we raise awareness?

Strategy, Thought Leadership, Outreach

GOAL 1

Commit to Mission, Vision, and JEDI language as a foundation for communications. Publicly and repeatedly speak about the work Blue Sky Fund is doing every day to get closer to that (M, V, JEDI) reality.

GOAL 2

Reputation Management³: Raise awareness and generate interest in Blue Sky Fund. Become a familiar and respected name in the Richmond region as a trusted resource in outdoor education and equitable outdoor access.

GOAL 3

Relationship Management: Maintain and grow relationships throughout the Richmond region. Become a go-to organization for outdoor adventure opportunities for students and families in **urban communities.**

5. Work / Action Plan Overview

An accompanying Work / Action Plan serves to provide a more granular view of the goals and initiatives associated with each strategic focus area. It can include a further breakdown of sub-tasks, persons accountable, and associated timeframes for each goal.

The Work / Action plan should be viewed and used as a living document; evolving as plans and objectives shift over the next 3 years.

6. Final Recommendations and Next Steps

First, the JEDI Plan and accompanying language creates an opportunity to begin sharing Blue Sky Fund's story and commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in a more public way. It creates an opportunity for Board, Staff, Volunteers, Students, Educators, and Funders alike to rally around a cause that is worthy of attention and support. It also acknowledges Blue Sky Fund's commitment to exploring the historical realities that have contributed to the very reason Blue Sky Fund exists, to begin with.

To that end: There is still some 'homework' that needs to be done to ensure the organization's commitments and efforts are developed and articulated in a way that will resonate with the community and other key stakeholders. Board and Staff agreed that enlisting the support of an organization who

³ In practice, this looks like: brand association - when someone brings up, "outdoor education" and/or "equitable outdoor access" we want them to think: Blue Sky Fund.

specializes in DEI - such as Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities - would be helpful to ensure this work is carried out thoughtfully. The following are a collection of the specific initiatives Board and Staff would like to explore with the support of an expert in the DEI space:

1. Updates to methods and terminology (Recommendation #1 in [VCIC Report](#))

- a. The organization should prioritize collaborative efforts with strategic partners, Board, Staff and a partner with expertise in the DEI space to explore possible improvements to methods and terminology used in communication and promotional materials, as recommended by VCIC in the Focus Group Report. For example, this may include:
 - i. Determining alternative language for the word “urban,” “underserved,” and/or “low income”
 - ii. Determining alternative language, if deemed necessary, for “shared lived experiences,” especially as it relates to staffing and recruitment efforts
 - iii. A high-level audit of JEDI Plan to ensure alignment with any suggested improvements to terminology prior to approval/implementation

2. Diversity among Board, Staff, and (for some programs) student participants (Observation #4 and Recommendation #3 in [VCIC Report](#))

- a. The organization should prioritize collaborative efforts with strategic partners, Board, Staff and a partner with expertise in the DEI space to develop an approach to staffing and recruiting that shows a commitment to DEI. This may include review of job descriptions, requirements, etc.

3. Understanding the [historical] context for gaps that exist (Observation #2 in [VCIC Report](#))

- a. The organization should prioritize collaborative efforts with strategic partners, Board, Staff and a partner with expertise in the DEI space to further develop awareness and education around culturally relevant and historical information. This may be particularly helpful in supporting Blue Sky Fund educators in delivering on an aspiration to become a “trusted resource” in outdoor education and equitable access to the outdoors.

Second, this Strategic Plan should serve as a living document to be referred to over the next 3 years as it relates to the Mission and Vision the organization is working on and towards. The Work Plan outlines goals and related tactics which are trackable, task-able, measurable, and assigned to the appropriate individuals on the team to ensure progress is made. I do not recommend that these documents are viewed as ‘set in stone.’ Rather, their purpose should be to guide the efforts and to help prioritize work, especially in the midst of safely and effectively re-engaging students in programming.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not recommend that you remain steadfast in what’s made you successful to date. Those who have the privilege to be familiar with Blue Sky Fund have unique insight into the wonderful experiences and relationships born from your work. Capture and share those stories often. There’s a lot covered in this plan, and staying on track will not be an easy task. Consistent check-in with the Board and Staff focused solely on progress against strategic goals and initiatives will be key to successful implementation. To that end, I have included an additional resource for staying on track. See Appendix D.

Your collective passion for education, leadership, and equitable access to all that Virginia’s outdoor spaces have to offer is clear. Equipping those closest to the organization with the tools needed to bolster the work: impact narratives, JEDI language, and key metrics derived from more pointed data-collection through Salesforce - in combination with your already stellar programming - will be the ideal recipe for progress and momentum as Blue Sky Fund navigates the next several years.

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