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Schools Take Classes Outside

Area schools cultivate a fresh educational trend: conducting classes outdoors.

BY TERRI AKMAN



Schools in the Delaware Valley are taking advantage of the area's marvelous natural resources, teaching environmentalism, science, social studies, math and more in outdoor classes.

It's the classic classroom tableau: kids sitting at their desks, forlornly staring out the window, wishing they were outside. Area schools are heeding the siren song of Mother Nature, recognizing the educational opportunities inherent in conducting classes outdoors. And subjects aren't limited to just science and nature. Math, social studies and literature all have practical applications for outdoor learning, too, whether kids are counting tree rings or reading pastoral literature.

LEED leader

More and more schools are joining the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program, which sets goals of improving indoor and outdoor environmental quality, water efficiency, atmosphere and design innovation.

The country's first public high school to reach platinum LEED certification was Philadelphia's Kensington High School for the Creative and Performing Arts. By cleaning up the school grounds, which had been contaminated ever since the space was used as a railroad depot in the mid-1800s, Kensington boosted energy efficiency and decreased utility costs.

"To be able to learn about something in a classroom and then immediately apply it outside makes learning that much more relevant and motivates the students that much more," says Jean Wallace, CEO of the Green Woods Charter School in Philadelphia. Here, fourth-graders are immersed in a yearlong study of the history, geography and science of the Delaware River Watershed, and first-graders learn about water systems, wetlands and ponds. "They go to John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge several times throughout the year to look at the marsh and wetlands habitats, so they can compare and contrast the diversity of wildlife that they see in late fall and then again in the spring," says Wallace.

Green Woods is so bullish on outdoor education it is building a new facility with three and a half acres designed specifically for seamless integration of indoor and outdoor learning. Current plans incorporate a pond, stream, wetlands, rain gardens, potting sheds and docks.

More outdoor-ed programs

The Abington Friends School in Jenkintown, PA started its AFS Outside initiative last year to create open-air learning spaces. Here, a nature playground for younger students incorporates features like tree forts, art and music stations and open play spaces.

The Heritage School in Wayne, PA offers students the opportunity to get hands-on with nature in its Discovery Woods & Garden program. Classes are taught regardless of weather or season in designated stations for art, music, gardening and a variety of other learning activities.

In order to raise the green cred of its once state-of-the-art campus P.S. duPont Elementary School in Wilmington, DE eschewed offering classes in the 2008 academic year in lieu of making eco-friendly renovations, implementing the use of solar energy and spearheading programs based on energy conservation and re-using materials.

Every week, students from Kindergarten through eighth grade from the Philadelphia School make their way to the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education to take natural science classes and explore woods, meadows and creeks.

Students of all grades at Springside Chestnut Hill Academy in Philadelphia learn to care for their environment by tending for the school gardens and campus, as well as nearby Wissahickon Creek. Additionally, the school offers outdoor science courses and eco clubs.

Alder Middle School in Egg Harbor, NJ earned a US Department of Education Green Ribbon School award in large part due to its Catawba Project, a grassroots environmental education program. “Service learning and hands-on projects are an extension of the indoor classroom,” explains principal Joe Marinelli. Each year, Alder students identify an individual project where they want to make an impact. “Last year we built a community teaching garden in our township and this year we are trying to solve the school’s recycling problem to reduce our carbon footprint,” says sixth-grade teacher John Jones.

“Not all kids do their best learning sitting down in a classroom,” Jones continues. “The environment is an easy thing to get them passionate about because it involves nature and wildlife. Now they are learning because they want to solve a problem and make a difference.”

Nature Explore

Nature Explore, a nationwide collaborative project between the Arbor Day Foundation and Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, has a simple goal: Integrate the natural world into kids’ lives and school curricula. Expanding this mission, the Mary Kay Ash Charitable Foundation has funded the creation of Nature Explore classrooms specifically for children who have suffered domestic abuse.

[Click here](#) to see a list of schools awarded with Nature Explore Classroom certification.

The first Nature Explore classroom in Pennsylvania is the Fern Hollow Nature Center Nature Play Area in Sewickley, PA. Here, students learn about local bees, birds and fish.

At a Nature Explore-certified classroom in New Jersey, the Treetopia McGuire Youth Program at McGuire Air Force Base in New Hanover Township, kids plant their own gardens and tend to them with natural resources. The young gardeners and their families create rain buckets to collect water for plants and learn to adapt to changing weather conditions.

Another Nature Explore-certified spread in our area, the Sunset Vista Community Garden and

Learning Center at Sunset View Farm in Andover Township, NJ puts a farming twist on outdoor learning. Visiting students are taught to care for the farm's resident animals, including goats, sheep and chickens.

A changing culture

"Kids are naturally curious," reasons Tonyea Mead, science education associate for the Delaware Department of Education. "They want to be outside." New Jersey and Delaware are both lead states in the Next Generation Science Standards development process. "That involves how humans impact the world and how we can get children outside," Mead explains.

Delaware's Children in Nature Task Force was designed specifically to do just that. "Many times, students think science comes in a box," says Mead. "We are promoting an outside component connecting the classroom to the natural world. In the real world there are ecosystems everywhere, in a schoolyard habitat or a stream. We are pushing teachers to give students more outdoor experiences."

"The idea is to give kids a chance to explore and engage in unstructured ways, and to be able to actually get out and experience it rather than listening to a teacher talk about it," explains Mike Heinz, science coordinator for the NJ Department of Education. New Jersey Audubon, he says, is one organization that helps schools "find and develop outdoor education space right on the campus."

"The culture has changed," insists Jones, excited that his Alder students "now identify themselves as part of an environmentally forward-thinking school."

Terri Akman is a contributing writer to ***MetroKids***.