

Elementary students from the Highland Community School District, in partnership with The Prairie Enthusiasts, collect seeds from a golden sea of prairie grasses.

Learning rooted in place

KIRSTEN RUSCH

PLACE-BASED LEARNING CONNECTS KIDS TO THE NATURAL WORLD.

Skylar Primm and Kim Wahl

Hannah caught a persistent case of Lyme disease as a young girl and developed a fear of the outdoors that long outlasted her symptoms. By the start of high school, she had lost any connection to the natural world. Considering this history, Hannah took a big chance when she chose to enroll with the first class at High Marq Environmental Charter School in Montello. After four years of weekly outdoor learning experiences and through many highs and lows, she graduated with a renewed appreciation for the natural world and an understanding of her place in it. She especially learned to value time away from technology and the classroom walls, a value she carries with her into college. Throughout Wisconsin, hundreds of Hannahs are enrolled in place-based education programs that help them develop a sense of belonging in their local community and a responsibility to the natural world that sustains them.

In his bestselling book, “Last Child in the Woods” (2008), Richard Louv defined the disconnect between students, nature and our communities as “nature-deficit disorder.” As educators, we have a responsibility to guide the next generation as they grow into stewards of our natural places. Nature-deficit disorder is not an insurmountable obstacle — we can help young people connect to our world through meaningful outdoor experiences.

Place-based learning is a way to help students make that connection to nature and to understand their role in it. By practicing land stewardship, students like Hannah learn about relationships in their natural communities through restoration projects and sustainability efforts, either on the schoolyard or reaching into

the local community. Community partnerships help us to be more adaptive and sustainable as educators, while giving students direct experience with the 21st century skills of critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity — the 4-Cs of P21, a national nonprofit organization that advocates for 21st century readiness for every student. (Visit www.p21.org for more information.)

The Wisconsin Green Schools Network (WGSN) offers resources and support focusing on using the natural environment as a context for learning. WGSN also formed the Fostering Inquiry and Engaging Learners through Discovery (FIELD) Corps program to connect schools with field biologists who lead outdoor learning experiences. High Marq Environmental Charter School

in Montello and Highland Community School District in Highland are two examples of FIELD Corps schools where students develop deep connections with their natural communities, serving as models of place-based education.

Case study: High Marq

High Marq Environmental Charter School is in its seventh year of operation. This Marquette County public school in the rural Montello School District serves 32 students in grades 7 through 12. The day-to-day work in the classroom consists of student-driven projects while weekly field experiences directly connect students to local ecosystems and organizations. Through their six years using the community as a context for learning, students come to value Marquette County and develop hope for its future.

One such project involves a partnership with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. After the success of a few smaller projects in the area, local DNR staff and community members invited High Marq to contribute to a project in the Grand River Marsh Wildlife Area. Another local school would build an accessible blind for hunting and wildlife viewing in the marsh and High Marq was tasked with constructing and installing an accessible boardwalk to the completed blind.

With the supervision and assistance of DNR staff and local volunteers, and guided by the WGSN FIELD Corps educator, teams of five or six students constructed sections of the boardwalk on dry land. These construction crews practiced communication, collaboration and creativity — not to mention carpentry — while

working to solve a problem. Meanwhile, other student teams explored a local restored prairie and collected seeds for future DNR restoration efforts.

Later the same teams worked hip-deep in the wetland to install and build the boardwalk over the water. They battled mud, gravity and their own mistakes to make the structure secure, level and ready to serve the needs of individuals with or without disabilities. In the short term, High Marq students will be able to bring their families out on the boardwalk to show off the fruits of their labor. Longer term, future generations of students will walk in their footsteps as they explore this beautiful natural landscape.

This is only one example of a connection between students and the land at High Marq, and it would not be possible without the place-based element. Students could learn the same skills in the classroom, but the context of the natural environment provides meaning and purpose. The lessons our students learn will provide the environmental, cultural and economic basis for the future community leaders we need them to become.

Case study: Highland

In rural southwestern Wisconsin, Highland Community School District's vision

is rooted in community with a strong environmental education focus. To increase environmental literacy and foster a land stewardship ethic, the district contracts with a WGSN FIELD Corps educator to work with all students in grades 4K-8. Weekly hands-on field experiences and community partnerships teach students to appreciate Wisconsin's natural resources.

Highland Middle School students' outdoor learning experiences go beyond the classroom as they face environmental issues. For example, students visited Big Spring Creek and met with fish experts from the DNR and Trout Unlimited, who taught the students about fish tagging, stocking, population studies, fish shocking and threats to our native waterways. Both partners have worked with the school for several years.


Highland Elementary School has followed the middle school example of promoting ecoliteracy in the district. Recently, students took on a prairie restoration project and additional DNR staff visited Highland to discuss the role of prescribed burns in healthy prairies. They gave an overview of training and safety and volunteered to do a prescribed burn on the property outside of school time to aid the students in their prairie maintenance and restoration ef-

forts. Along with the DNR, the students have worked with The Prairie Enthusiasts (TPE) to learn more about the care, maintenance and restoration of Wisconsin's native prairies.

Elementary students visited the Mounds View Grasslands, part of the Driftless region, and land owned by TPE. At the prairie, they explored a large red barn full of prairie seeds. Some seeds were drying in child swimming pools, while others were ready to go in paper grocery bags hanging against the wall. It was an amazing sight as students learned about the complex process of prairie-seed storage and preparation.

Once students left the barn, they learned how to collect native Indian grass seed and then the real fun began. Students stared across a field of golden Indian grass and forbs, then grabbed a bucket and dove into the sea of prairie. With plants reaching above their heads, students collected seeds, explored the prairie and connected with nature. This partnership with TPE helped students learn firsthand the value of prairie and native plants, and TPE in turn donated seed to help the school in prairie restoration efforts on school property.

Through such field experiences — restoring prairie, wetlands and woodlands — students gain an appreciation of the web of life by learning the connections and relationships among plants and animals. In place-based learning, students are given the opportunity to reflect on their role and place in Wisconsin ecosystems, as well as their relationships with wildlife and each other.

David Sobel, an environmental educator from Antioch University, said, "If we want children to flourish, to become truly empowered, then let us allow them to love the Earth before we ask them to save it." Connecting people to place in this way is a critical first step in protecting Wisconsin's natural resources, now and in the future. 

Skylar L. Primm has taught in project-based schools since 2009, and for the last six years at High Marq Environmental Charter School. He is an instructional coach in project-based learning for the Montello School District. Outside of school, you'll find him photographing rocks, birds and lichens. Kim Wahl has 20 years of experience teaching science. She joined Wisconsin Green Schools Network in 2014 and works both as a FIELD Corps educator for High Marq and Highland and as a program director for WGSN. Kim is also adjunct faculty with the LEAF Forestry Education Program at UW-Stevens Point. The authors thank WGSN and all the students, teachers, volunteers and administrators who support their efforts.



Community volunteer Phil Anastasi helps High Marq students place a boardwalk they helped construct in the Grand River Marsh Wildlife Area.

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