
GET ‘EM OUTSIDE:

MAKING A CASE FOR PLACE-BASED EDUCATION

By Lisa Weise – Holt Public Schools

There is a movement afoot in the nation. One that goes against the recent trend towards more testing, less recess, and too many standards to fit in the school day. This movement doesn't ignore standards; rather it weaves the standards with the meanings and places that are ever present outside of our classrooms. Place-based education connects students, to communities while they are learning the standards in a lasting way. These projects range from simple community gardens to students helping local businesses to maintain local fisheries. The amazing part is that this shift of thinking is actually increasing student achievement on standardized tests (Sobel, 2005). One group of students, mentioned in Sobel's book, in Florida turned their project into a money maker. In one sense, this isn't a new idea. I would guess most teachers have heard of the idea of using a real-world context to connect standards to students. In other ways, place-based education is radically different from how we were taught to teach.

For one thing, there is no pre-written or packaged way to use place-based education in your school. It is so individualized that it goes completely counter to the national movement to standardize, standardize, standardize. This type of learning requires us to leave the schools, go out into the communities and find out where there is a need. David Sobel, the author of, *Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms and Communities* writes, "Place-based education is the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasizing hands-on, real-world experiences, students develop stronger ties to their community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world, and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens". In his book, Sobel provides details for several place-based education projects. All over the country students and teachers are taking abandoned lots, and turning them into native planting areas that act as outdoor classrooms.



Figure One: Kids making Trails

Place-based education answers Richard Louv's call to connect kids with nature. In the book, *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv makes the case that students and society as a whole would work better if families, schools and communities renewed their connection with the outdoors. This is not a call to take every kid backpacking. It is a call to unplug now and again and tune in to the natural world. It is a call to find ways to put down books and computers for a minute and pick up a pair of binoculars. Students experience first, question second, and learn when the concept has a mean-

continued on page 8

ing beyond the walls of the classroom. This is more than making kids feel good about themselves and their environment; this is good teaching practice that leads to lasting learning. When a standard has a context and a meaning outside the classroom it becomes interesting and real. Recently, a youtube video has been posted called, "Get 'Em Outside". This short movie inspires people that work with kids to connect with place as much as possible.

My school has a small stand of trees by the playground that was basically a "don't go in there" area to most parents, teachers and kids. I had taken students and teachers to the edge of the woods to collect insects and observe, but never really entered the area. It wasn't until I saw Richard Louv speak about his book that I thought about what might be in the woods. I didn't even know if it was owned by the school district. To my surprise, not only was the small stand of trees owned by our district, a whole acre connected to the woods that were covered in honeysuckle, some nice trees, and poison ivy was also owned by our schools. So, I thought, "here's my spot to fix for the world." I

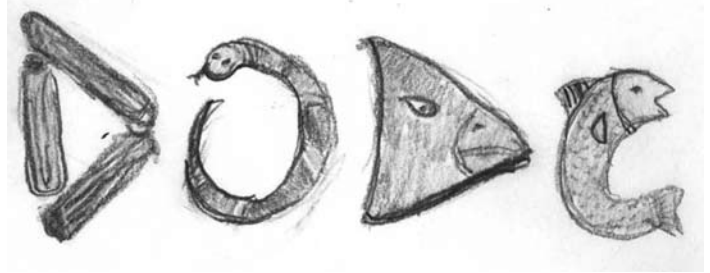


Figure Three: Student Contest Winner

figure if everyone takes on one little spot, one acre, how much more pleasant would our world be? How many more nature trails or little hikes would exist in places where there was once an abandoned lot or play land for invasive species?

Over the next several months with help from parents, teachers and neighbors we transformed the woods. One particular neighbor happened to work with the Michigan Nature Association and became an essential part of our project. He helped us identify the invasive species and develop a plan of action. The first step was the removal of trash and invasive species. These woods



Figure two: A group of kids helping to plant native species in the woods with a parent.



Figure Four: Critter Condo

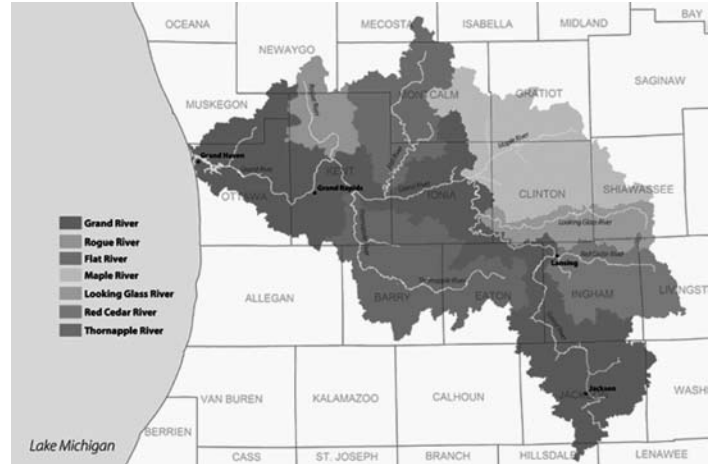


Figure Five: Grand Watershed. Grand Watershed taken from: www.grandlearningnetwork.org

had clearly been misused for many years as we found a collection of old fence posts, golf balls, even what appeared to be an old campsite. The next step was finding ways to involve the kids. We had a few families bringing their kids to pick up trash, but needed the students to help in some way.

We decided to do a survey and a contest asking, “What do you want to see in the DODC (Dimondale Outdoor Discovery Center)” The survey also left a place for kids to draw their ideas for a DODC logo. I expected a few kids to turn it in, since it was the last week of school, but I wound up with hundreds of entries. The winner made the letters into critters (see figure three).

As the project has progressed different teachers have come on board and as they do the students follow. A 3rd grade teacher is working on a grant for stools to use when observing within the nature center. She is hoping to organize nature nights for 3rd grade parents and students. The 1st grade does a monarch butterfly project and is working on planting plants for the butterflies that they hope to release in the spring. If we get enough plants we can become a “monarch waystation” and join a larger community of butterfly watchers. Second grade studies plant life cycles and is going on a seed collecting hunt next week. I hope to have them working in the butterfly garden area along with 1st grade.

One 4th grade teacher made signs for our critter condos using a wood burner.

The project has been a labor of love that has led to excitement that just doesn’t come from anywhere else, but a community project. Just yesterday our town’s manager called to see if I could use some woodchips from a trimming project and a student that was in need of community service hours for the National Honor Society.

One opportunity for place-based education exists for those teachers in the Grand River Watershed. Teachers and community members from all over Lower Michigan are connecting to find ways to learn about and sustain the Grand Watershed. There are opportunities for stewardship labeling drains and communicating with neighbors about where the run off from driveways and roads winds up. There are opportunities for learning about local ecosystems in every schoolyard, neighborhood and square foot of grass. There are opportunities in a drop of pond water. No matter how large or small your school space might be there’s a place for you outside that likely connects to a watershed. Rather than saving a rainforest that most kids can only see in pictures, why not save a river or pond near the school?

In Sobel’s book, *Beyond Ecophobia* he recommends no tragedies before middle school. No oil spills, no extinction, no global warming or doom and gloom. Instead, start a child’s connection to the natural world to smaller wonders and problems they can understand and help to fix. Sobel argues that the more connected students feel to their own place, the more likely they

continued on page 10

are to act in environmentally conscious ways as adults. On the other hand, students that are frightened by images of a dying earth before they have had a chance to connect with their environment may just give up because the task is too daunting and hard to understand (Sobel, 1996).

Backyard habitats connect to the Grand Watershed and provide a context for learning about characteristics of plants and animals as well as their interactions. Students can test water quality in science, measure peak flow rates in math and even connect to language arts and social studies through books like, "Paddle to the Sea". Schools and teachers with a moderate play area, could consider constructing a community rain garden or outdoor classroom that can serve as a model for preserving their watershed. The online community offers a few other ways to connect. The journey north allows teachers and students to follow the migration of animals during the changing season. The great backyard bird count is another way to look at migration during seasonal changes. Many organizations have grant money available to help you put some of these ideas into place in your schoolyard. The key is to find out what interests you and your students in your community. Who lives near your school? Who is around the corner? There may be someone there, looking for you as much as you are looking for them.

POSSIBLE PLACES TO LOOK FOR GRANTS:

- National Gardeners Association: www.kidsgardening.com/grants.asp
- Wildones- Seeds for Education: www.for-wild/seedmony.html
- Together Green: www.togethergreen.org

OTHER RESOURCES FOR OUTDOOR LEARNING:

- No Child Left Inside (Get Em Outside) video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRR1feHqZPY>
- Michigan Nature Association: <http://www.michigannature.org/>
- Journey North: <http://www.learner.org/jnorth/>
- Acorn Naturalist (supplies for outdoor learning): <http://www.acornnaturalists.com/>
- Information about monarch weigh stations: <http://www.monarchwatch.org/waystations/>
- Critter Condos: <http://www.dnr.state.wi.us/org/land/wildlife/publ/deadwood.pdf>
- Monarch Waystation Info: <http://www.monarchwatch.org/waystations/>

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author welcomes your questions and comments: lweise@hpsk12.net

