

[Back to Beginning](#)

Doing What Works, Teaching What Matters: Utilizing School Forests

by Jeremy Solin, Wisconsin School Forest Education Specialist



Prairie plant seeds are collected for propagation in preparation for the student-led restoration efforts at the Portage School Forest.

Do you have an educational resource that can enhance learning, improve behavior, and increase attendance of your students, while helping to meet important community and social goals? If your district has a school forest, your answer is yes. Chances are good that your district has, or could have, a school forest. Nearly half of Wisconsin's school districts (197) have at least one school forest. About six new school forests are registered each year. Districts receive these lands through donations, via dedication of existing lands, and by entering into agreement with a local municipality or private landowner for use of land as a school forest.

School forests are remarkable resources that are available to simultaneously enhance student learning and increase students' environmental literacy.

Doing What Works

Research has shown that using the environment as the integrated context for classroom education enhances student learning, improves behavior, and increases school attendance (Lieberman and Hoody 1998). All subject areas can be taught utilizing experiences from the school forest. In addition to increasing student learning, school forest experiences can address state standards in a variety of subjects. The reason that outdoor environmental education is effective education is easily understood. School forest education provides opportunity for hands-on, experiential learning that is interdisciplinary and locally relevant to students. That is, learning at the school forest is "real-world," which is what students desire and respond to.

There is great opportunity to involve parents and the community at school forests through volunteer activities and programs. This gives the community a chance to understand what students are learning and to interact with teachers and students in a less formal setting. Recent studies have shown outdoor education programs, such as school forests, increase overall parental involvement in schools (Peacock 2006).

Teaching What Matters

Our communities and society are facing a host of environmental and social challenges for which we need to prepare students. Today's students (and much of the rest of our society) are not connected to place – they are connected to electronic devices that create a virtual world. This is creating what Richard Louv (2006) coined as "Nature Deficit Disorder." Nature Deficit

Continued on next page...



Published by
The Association of
Wisconsin School
Administrators
4797 Hayes Rd.,
Suite 103
Madison, WI 53704
Phone: (608) 241-0300
Fax: (608) 249-4973
Web: www.awsa.org

Views expressed by authors
do not necessarily reflect
AWSA policy or advice.

[Back to Beginning](#)**Doing What Works...** *continued*

How did this happen?
Students at the Boston
School Forest (Stevens
Point School District)
ponder a crooked tree.

Disorder leads to childhood obesity, cognitive development issues (including potentially ADHD), and a lack of connection to natural and human communities. School forests provide the opportunity to counter Nature Deficit Disorder. In addition, a sense of place is essential in creating relevancy in education as well as assuring that we strive to live well in our place. We typically identify ourselves through our relationships – with family, friends, neighbors, the land, a community, etc. As Wendell Berry says, “If you don’t know where you are, you don’t know *who* you are” (Stegner 1992).

Students today have little contact with natural resource management decision-making. As a result, our society has minimal understanding of the resources that are used to create the products of our daily life. The school forest is often the only opportunity for students to experience and observe forest management. School forests can be managed to showcase different management techniques and to demonstrate the forest’s response to these activities. These experiences provide students with the background to make informed choices regarding the management of natural resources and their lifestyle practices.

Resources for School Districts

As a partnership between the Department of Natural Resource (DNR) – Division of Forestry and the Wisconsin Center for Environmental Education (WCEE) in the College of Natural Resources at UW–Stevens Point, the statewide school forest program provides resources to help school forests achieve their full potential. The Wisconsin School Forest Education Specialist, who is available to assist schools in developing their school forest programs, exists as part of the LEAF (Learning, Experiences, & Activities in Forestry) program. LEAF is the Wisconsin K-12 forestry education program.

School districts receive a number of benefits from registering their forest in the program. These include:

- The Wisconsin Environmental Education Board (WEEB) has allocated \$190,000 annually specifically for districts to develop school forest education programs.
- DNR county foresters are available to develop management plans, provide planting assistance, and set up timber sales.
- Free tree seed and seedlings from the state nurseries are available for planting on the school forest for reforestation purposes.

Continued on next page...



Published by
The Association of
Wisconsin School
Administrators
4797 Hayes Rd.,
Suite 103
Madison, WI 53704
Phone: (608) 241-0300
Fax: (608) 249-4973
Web: www.awsa.org

Views expressed by authors
do not necessarily reflect
AWSA policy or advice.

[Back to Beginning](#)**Doing What Works...** *continued*

Tri-County High School environmental counselors monitor Eastern bluebird nest boxes during their summer training.

- Assistance and resources from the Wisconsin School Forest Education Specialist to provide professional development, consulting, and resources to help school districts fully utilize their school forest. Most programs and resources are available at no costs to districts.

Example of How School Districts are Utilizing School Forests

At the Tri-County School Forest in Waushara County, high school students are trained in an intensive summer program to teach school forest classes for other district students. The environmental counselors also conduct ecological research at the school forest, which serves as the basis for management activities. The last timber sale was inventoried, marked, and put out for bid by students with guidance from their school forest coordinator and a DNR forester.

You'll find River Crossing Charter School students in the Portage School Forest restoring woodland, wetland, and prairie communities. In this integrated class, their fieldwork provides the basis for all of their classroom studies. The students spend at least one day per week outdoors learning science, writing, math, and other subjects through hands-on environmental activities.

All kindergarten through sixth-grade students in the Stevens Point school district annually visit the Boston School Forest. They visit during alternating seasons so each trip is a new learning experience. Through a recent harvest in their school forest, students will be learning about the forest's response to thinning, which will include increased tree growth and greater plant diversity.

The Lake Michigan shoreline, dunes, wetlands, and forests of the Rahr Memorial School Forest provide the perfect setting for an integrated studies unit being taught by middle school teachers in the Manitowoc school district. A new classroom and programs will help students to understand how forests and humans acquire and use energy.

Every spring fourth-graders tap maple trees, collect sap, and witness historical reenactments of maple sugaring at the D.C. Everest School Forest. The public also gets involved during a "Sap Tappin'" weekend. The 20 to 30 gallons of syrup produced each year provide the topping for pancake breakfasts during the fifth-graders' overnight program.

Continued on next page...



Published by
The Association of
Wisconsin School
Administrators
4797 Hayes Rd.,
Suite 103
Madison, WI 53704
Phone: (608) 241-0300
Fax: (608) 249-4973
Web: www.awsa.org

Views expressed by authors
do not necessarily reflect
AWSA policy or advice.

[Back to Beginning](#)

Students measure a tree at the Elcho School Forest in pursuit of the "champion tree."

Doing What Works... *continued*

Elcho holds an annual School Forest Day. Professional resource managers, loggers, school administrators, and teachers help students understand the forest and their responsibility in conserving its resources. Through local fundraising efforts, Elcho recently built a new education facility at their school forest, which will expand the opportunities to use the forest.

The Milton C. Potter's School Forest in the Milwaukee school district serves primarily as a challenge and ropes course. Participants complete the program with increased self-confidence, better teamwork skills, and a greater awareness of their environment. For many of these inner-city students, this is the first time they have been out of an urban landscape of buildings and concrete.

Menomonie's Bjornson Recreation-Education Center is a 443 acre school forest that hosts thousands of students and community members every year. Each year, students plant thousands of trees, conduct timber stand improvement projects, and collect acorns for the state nurseries. Opportunities for recreational use by the community are also available. The school forest hosts woodland owner workshops to demonstrate the management that has occurred on this property.

Conclusion

School forests are incredible educational resources that can help your schools do what works and teach what matters. The Wisconsin School Forest Education Specialist and the LEAF Program are available to help you and your teachers effectively utilize the school forest by providing a range of professional development opportunities and a variety of resources. For more information, visit www.uwsp.edu/leaf/sf or contact, Jeremy Solin at jsolin@uwsp.edu or 715-346-4907.

References:

Lieberman, G.A. and L.L. Hoody 1998. Closing the Achievement Gap: Using the Environment as an Integrated Context for Learning. State Environment and Education Roundtable. Published by Science Wizards, Poway, CA.

Louv, R. 2005. *Last Child in the Woods*. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC.

Peacock, A. 2006. Changing Minds: The lasting impact of school trips. The Innovation Center, University of Exeter, United Kingdom.

Stegner, W. 1992. *Where the Bluebirds Sing to the Lemonade Springs*. End ♦



Published by
The Association of
Wisconsin School
Administrators
4797 Hayes Rd.,
Suite 103
Madison, WI 53704
Phone: (608) 241-0300
Fax: (608) 249-4973
Web: www.awsa.org

Views expressed by authors
do not necessarily reflect
AWSA policy or advice.