

Wisconsin School Forest Education Plan Outline



School forests are incredible education resources. However, often, they are not utilized to their full potential. A variety of reasons exist as to why this is true. One reason is that teacher, administrators, and the community have not determined how the school forest fits into the district's curriculum and how it can be used to enhance student learning. The school forest education plan is the tool to make these connections.

This document provides an established, approved outline for school forest education plan development. The majority of the components of the outline are required to be completed to have an official education plan. However, a few components are just recommendations. These are marked with an asterisk (*).

The outline was developed in collaboration with educators and administrators from across the state and was reviewed by outdoor education and resource management professionals.

A variety of incentives are available to registered school forests that have officially recognized education and management plans. These incentives are also available to registered school forests that use these resources as part of their education or management plan development. These include:

- 1) Forest management assistance from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources – Division of Forestry
- 2) Free seed and seedlings from the state nursery program
- 3) Eligibility for Wisconsin Environmental Education Board school forest grants

If you have any questions about this education plan outline, please contact the Wisconsin School Forest Education Specialist with the LEAF program at: 715-346-4907 or leaf@uwsp.edu.

Structure:

- 1) Rationale
- 2) Site description and opportunities
- 3) Educational connections
- 4) Sustaining the school forest program
- 5) Appendices
 - a) Example needs assessment (included)
 - b) Model education plan (approximately 20 page document and available on LEAF website (<http://www.uwsp.edu/cnr/leaf/sf/ed.htm>) or call LEAF or WEEB and one will be mailed to you).

WEEB expects the resultant education plan to be a *unique* document based on the strengths and needs of the district (i.e., human, site, equipment and local curriculum).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The school forest education plan outline was created through the efforts of many individuals and organizations. The Wisconsin Forest Resources Education Alliance (WFREA) and the Learning, Experiences, & Activities (LEAF) program were the coordinators for this project. Funding was provided by the Wisconsin Environmental Education Board (WEEB).

Participants in the focus group that drafted the components of the education plan:

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1) RATIONALE

The rationale will provide the background information for why and how the school forest education program will be developed.

Value statement

The value statement describes why outdoor environmental education and the school forest are important. This should utilize the existing research that has determined that environmental education increases test scores and attendance while decreasing behavioral problems. The statement should be broad enough to include all grade levels and subject areas in the school district.

Target messages

Target messages are the broad themes that will be covered at the school forest. Educational goals and specific learner objectives will be addressed in the “educational connections” section.

Needs assessment results

The needs assessment results provide the basis for developing the school forest program. This should include information such as:

- Interest in using the school forest among teachers, administrators, and/or students
- Barriers to using the school forest
- Knowledge base and comfort of teachers related to outdoor EE
- Logistics needs, e.g., restrooms, transportation, safety

An example needs assessment can be found in the appendix.



2) SITE DESCRIPTION AND OPPORTUNITIES

In this section, the site, and specific educational opportunities provided by the site, will be described.

Site description & location

Describe the location and major features of the site. Recommended features to include are:

- Map of and directions to the school forest in relation to the school district facilities
- Legal description and size
- Map of major community types (e.g., forest, wetland, lakes, prairie)
- Description and location of unique site features (e.g., unusual/rare plants, exceptional wildlife habitat, scenic areas)
- Facilities on the school forest

***Site history**

The natural and cultural history of the site can provide exciting educational opportunities. If possible, include some of this information. This can be expanded as the program is developed – it's a great opportunity to get students involved. Include:

- Cultural history (pre-historic to present day human use of the school forest)
- Natural history (e.g., geology, ecology, climate)

***Site management**

Educational goals should drive the management of the site. This section can help establish the connection between the education plan and the management plan. Include the key goals, objectives, and other recommendations for management.



3) EDUCATIONAL CONNECTIONS

This section is the heart of the education plan. The educational connections will build on the rationale and site description and will provide the basis for development of the school forest curriculum. The school forest should be an extension of the classroom. Utilize the school forest to teach what can be best taught outdoors through experiential activities.

Key concepts

List the key learning concepts for students at the school forest. These are educational goals from which learning objectives will be developed.

Site connections

List learning objectives that can be taught, demonstrated, and/or experienced at the school forest. These objectives should relate to specific key concepts. It is highly recommended to utilize components of the management plan and connect to resource management activities.

Classroom curriculum connections

Provide the connections from the key concepts to be taught at the school forest to what is already being taught in the classroom. List in what grade and during what time of the year concepts are covered. This will essentially take the form of a scope and sequence.

Alignment with state standards

Align the key concepts with appropriate state standards.

Staff development

Provide a professional development strategy for district staff. The needs assessment should provide the information necessary to determine specific staff needs. Determine:

- What topics (e.g., forest ecology content, outdoor education methods)
- What format(s)
- Location (best if at the school forest)
- Timing
- Who will deliver (e.g., district staff, resource professionals)

Resources

List the people, materials, on-site facilities, etc. that are available to or that are needed to implement the education plan.

Assessment

Determine how success of the school forest program will be assessed, e.g., # of students learning at the school forest, specific student learning, student standardized test scores.

4) SUSTAINING THE SCHOOL FOREST PROGRAM

The information in this section will assist in long-term maintenance of the school forest program and will provide for continuity in case of staffing or funding changes.

School forest committee

Establishing a school forest committee is perhaps the most important activity to assist in the development and maintenance of the program. The school forest committee should be made up of individuals that represent diverse grade levels, subject areas, administration, and community partners. List the school forest committee members.

It is also recommended that committee responsibilities be developed and assigned. These responsibilities should be considered:

- Financial aspects
- Site development and maintenance, e.g., facilities, trails, educational materials
- District personnel structure, e.g., school forest coordinator, responsibilities for grounds
- Threats to & opportunities for the school forest program
- Education and management plans & personnel review every 3 – 5 years
- Incentives/support for on-going involvement/utilization of school forest

Communication

Develop a strategy for how the value, needs, and successes will be shared with teachers, administrators and the community to build support for the school forest program.

Long-range plan

List long-range goals for the school forest program. It is recommended to include goals that will take varying lengths of time and effort to accomplish, i.e., more easily attainable, short-term goals and “pie in the sky,” long-term goals.

Implementation plan

Develop a plan, including timeline, to implement the education plan and other components identified in the long-range vision. Include key activities and resources (human and/or financial) needed to implement specific components.

***District commitment**

Get district commitment of the school forest program via school board adoption of the school forest education plan, school forest rationale, or letter of commitment.

5) APPENDIX

a) Example needs assessment (see enclosed)

The needs assessment should determine the:

- Interest in using the school forest among teachers, administrators, and/or students
- Barriers to using the school forest
- Knowledge base and comfort of teachers related to outdoor EE
- Logistics needs, e.g., transportation, safety, scheduling
- Facilities needed

b) Model education plan (see LEAF website at (<http://www.uwsp.edu/cnr/leaf/sf/ed.htm>))

WEEB expects the resultant education plan to be a *unique* document based on the strengths and needs of the district (i.e., human, site, equipment and local curriculum).

