

**LEAF/Goodman Armstrong Creek
Community Partnership Project**

**Year Two Participant Evaluation Report
Executive Summary**

September 2011



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Executive Summary

Background

Goodman and its neighbor Armstrong Creek are small interconnected communities with approximately 2000 people living in and around the area. In 2009 the G-AC School District and LEAF formed a partnership to become LEAF's first "School of Excellence" with the aim to integrate the community and school forest into a curriculum that uses the natural and human community as the setting for and purpose of learning in the school. During the summer of 2009, a planning team consisting of district and LEAF staff led a community session in which 20 community members helped set a vision for the G-AC community. From this session the planning team developed a framework for how this community vision would be translated into the curriculum. For the last two years LEAF has been working with G-AC on the resulting school-wide project to enhance the learning opportunities at the school forest for both students and the community while integrating concepts, skills, and habits of mind (i.e. an habitual way of thinking about the forest and community) that address the community vision. In the spring of 2011, extensive surveys were administered to assess teacher and student attitudes towards the G-AC school, community and school forest as well as student knowledge of basic forest ecology. One hundred and five students as well as fifteen teachers from pre-K to 12th grade participated.

4K– 2nd Grade Results

The survey of 4K – 2nd graders helps shed insight into the attitudes of G-AC's young children regarding their school, the forest, outside and free time. At this early age the students still love to play and they like school. They are also growing in their comfort with nature and the forest. Still 21% of these the 4K -2nd grade students feel the forest is a scary place. Despite this fear, 85% like to spend time in the forest, 95% think wild animals are interesting and 90% don't believe "it is okay to kill ants and insects for fun." They also are already well aware that they use things that come from the forest. And even more than school; these children like to go outside to learn.

3rd – 12th Grade Results

G-AC students have a positive connection to their community. This sentiment was found throughout many of the 3rd-12th grade students' responses. Eighty-eight percent of the students agree with the statement "I feel like I am part of this community" with 35% of those students strongly agreeing. These students also have a positive connection to their school. Most reported they liked school, with only 18% reporting they never "enjoyed coming to school." Even more important than their strong connection to school and community, the G-AC students feel they have the ability to make a difference in their community. Forty-eight percent of the 5th – 12th graders feel they know how to make the community a better place while 42% of 7th – 12th graders believed they can make a difference.

Over 80% of 3rd-12th grade students also feel the school is environmentally healthy and over 70% feel the community is healthy. And G-AC students are actively engaged in taking care of their

community and the environment. All of the 5th and 6th grade students and over half of the 7th-12th grade students reported doing something with their classmates in the last two months to care for the place they live. G-AC students also place a high value on the forest and understand its importance to the G-AC community. Results show that 68% of 3rd-12th grade students are thinking regularly about how the forest impacts them personally and 57% are thinking regularly about how the forest impacts their community. Over 80% of 3rd – 12th graders feel very comfortable in the forest. Most also report noticing plants and animals they are familiar with as they go about the day. Students' knowledge of basic ecological concepts is strong but their specific knowledge of forest ecology and Wisconsin forests is a bit weaker.

Teacher Results

The teacher survey was designed to assess teachers' overall perception of the success and impact of the community partnership project as well as ways to improve the project in the future. Results indicate a significant drop in both teachers' perception of community support and their own project preparedness between year one and two of project. One of the more dramatic drops was in teacher's perception of the benefit of the project to students. While still agreeing that the students benefitted from the school forest project, the teachers' strong agreement of the project's benefits to students dropped from 83% to 33% between year one and two.

Overall teachers still feel the school forest project is progressing as expected. They also find the original curriculum framework a useful organizing tool and that the project is helping to ensure the G-AC school and community continue well into the future. The G-AC teachers still believe it is important to get the students into the school forest more often and to maintain community involvement. Many teachers also feel that connecting students with school forest and watching student excitement and engagement grow has been one of the most meaningful elements of the project since its launch. When the teachers were asked about project challenges, many expressed the need to find more time to effectively leverage the project resources and the school forest itself and the need to find more time to innovate their own practices. When asked to share what additional support and attention is needed to make the most of the school forest project, teacher again identified time as a significant factor, with emphasis on time to get the students outside more, time to better integrate their curriculum and time for professional development to work with peers and further grow their curriculum development skills. One teacher's response also indicated the need to rebuild momentum around the project. "Set fire under staff again. Get focus back to what each [grade] level can do."

Conclusions

The data collected from the G-AC students and teachers reflects a school community committed to and regularly thinking about its community and the school forest. Both students and teachers express an interest in and excitement about learning in the school forest. They also show an awareness that learning about the community and the forest is more than just school work – it is vital to maintaining the health of the community. The following highlight four themes that may be worth further exploration.

Sense of Connection to the Forest

A high number of G-AC students report feeling very comfortable in the forest. They see the forest as a place to play, build forts, hunt and simply find peace and solitude. And while the assessment of their scientific understanding of the forest shows a general weakness, 60% of 3rd-12th grade students still self-report they “know a lot about the forest.” Responses throughout the survey indicate that the knowledge they have and personally value does not just come from books. It is knowledge that rather comes from regular and sustained time in the forest both during and out-of-school, alone and with friends and family. The G-AC survey also shows that G-AC students are committed to protecting their treasured forest. The G-AC 7th-12th grade students’ responses offer a unique opportunity to further explore the correlation between perceived connectedness and action. Clearly something right is happening in this community that we can all learn from.

Finding the Time to Innovate

It is not surprising to find that teachers need more time to effectively reach the goals of this project. Time always seems to be in short supply in the life of an educator. More and more is demanded of a teacher and less and less is provided to help them meet these demands. But while the G-AC teachers can certainly benefit from more time, they are accomplishing much with the time they do have. Teacher responses indicate a desire to use the school forest and the project resources to their highest potential but that time constraints are keeping them from accomplishing this goal. Many see the project as a way to explore new approaches to teaching and learning but do not feel that they can do this alone. These frustrations may be why the teachers’ perceived value of the project to their students dropped significantly between year one and two. Further understanding why this dropped has occurred and determining how to support these teachers’ further growth and innovation is critical to the overall advancement of the project.

The Complexity of Goodman Forever

One of the main tenets of this school forest project is to contribute to “Goodman Forever.” This is a large undertaking to which, the survey results show, teachers are committed. As one teacher shared, she feels the most important outcome of the school forest project is “that we’ve connected kids to their place and that they are learning. And that in turn will keep them here and keep this community going.” Maintaining a healthy G-AC community is a complex task that is strongly impacted by the outside world. Student responses throughout the survey demonstrate that many, particularly those in 7th grade and higher, understand much is required to ensure “Goodman Forever.” The G-AC students recognize maintaining a healthy population and jobs are critical to a healthy G-AC community. They recognize job creation is not only necessary for the economic health of the community but for the overall survivability of the G-AC community and local school. When asked to respond to the more complex statement “It is okay for a company to build a factory even if it means destroying some endangered plants” older students’ nuanced responses uncover their appreciation of the complex nature of this question. While the majority of younger students seem to see destroying endangered species as a black and white issue (i.e. you can’t destroy endangered species, period) the older students responses were more distributed with 10% reporting they were unsure of their response. These older students seem able to both hold the awareness that building a new factory is very economically beneficial to their community and that endangered plants should be protected. And they, like many rural communities, are considering the complex relationship of jobs and the environment – a complex relationship that the founders of the community were able to balance. Now it will require this next generation to seek a new and innovative approach to “Goodman Forever.”

The data collected in this survey is simply a snap shot of the knowledge and attitudes of the G-AC students and teachers. It is therefore not possible to draw any exact conclusions as to what is most directly influencing the beliefs and understandings of the students. What is clear, however, is that there are many good things happening within the G-AC community; and, that they are having a positive impact on the students' connection to their community and the natural environment. These students, with the help of their teachers and the strong Goodman Armstrong Creek community, are poised to become important stewards of the future. And this is one of the strongest indications that the Goodman Armstrong Creek school setting is achieving the stated aim of the LEAF/Goodman Armstrong Creek Community Partnership project – “to integrate the community and school forest into a curriculum that uses the natural and human community as the setting for and purpose of learning in the school.” Stewarding the future of this unique community and all its inhabitants is one of the more important purposes of learning that the G-AC students, teachers and the community have committed together to undertake.