2024-25 Annual School Forest Survey Results

The Annual School Forest Survey serves as a “snapshot” of school forest activity in Wisconsin, not as a comprehensive report. Since not all school forests submit data and not all of the same school forests submit data every year, we can observe general trends throughout certain questions that were asked in the survey. One should not assume that these are precise and final numbers. This report is merely a representation of Wisconsin’s School Forest Program over the 2024-25 school year.

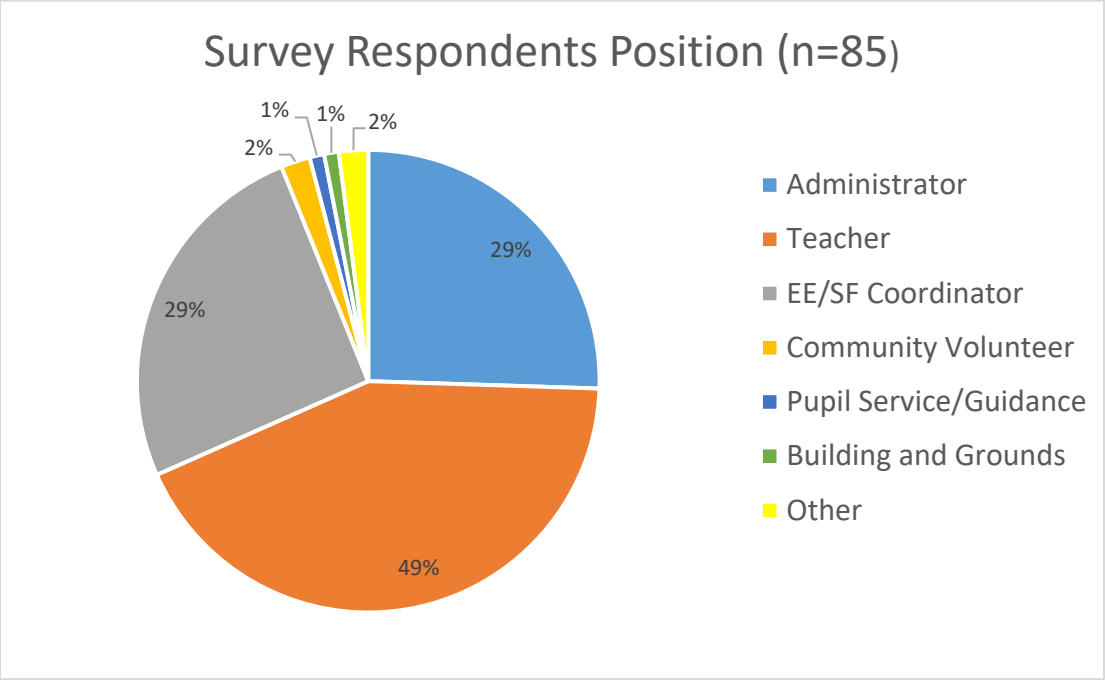
Response Rate:

Surveys were sent to 391 contacts at 257 individual schools or districts. The survey was sent to 245 public schools, 7 private schools, and 5 higher education institutions with registered school forests. Eighty-five responses were received from 83 public school districts, 1 private school, and 1 higher education institution. Two responses came from the same district, 3 were mostly incomplete and six surveys were basically blank. Including all survey responses, the response rate was 32% (n=85).

The respondents included: Abbotsford, Adams-Friendship, Alma Center Humbird Merrillan, Almond-Bancroft, Antigo, Athens (Maple Grove), Baldwin-Woodville, Beaver Dam, Beecher-Dunbar-Pembine, Boyceville, Burlington, Cadott, Cambridge, Campbellsport, Chequamegon, Chilton, Colfax, Cornell High School, Cumberland, De Soto, Deerfield, Elcho, Elkhorn, Evansville, Flambeau High School, Gillett, Goodman-Armstrong Creek, Green Lake, Greenwood, Hartland Lakeside, Holy Hill, Janesville, Kickapoo, LaCrosse (Summit), Ladysmith, Lake Holcombe, Laona, Lodi, Madison, Manawa, Marathon, Marshfield, Medford, Merrill, Middleton-Cross Plains, Milwaukee, Mondovi (Anthony Acres) Monona Grove, Montello (High Marq), Necedah, New Auburn, Newman Catholic Schools, Nicolet Union High School, Northland Pines, Northwood, Onalaska, Oregon, Owen-Withee, Phillips, Prairie Farm School District, Prentice, Princeton, Random Lake, Rhinelander, Rib Lake, River Falls, River Valley, Sauk Prairie, Shawano, Solon Springs, St. Croix Central, Stevens Point, Suring,Tigerton, UW River Falls, Verona, Wausaukee, West Salem, Westfield, Weyauwega-Fremont, White Lake, Whitnall, Wild Rose, Wisconsin Dells, and Wonewoc--Center.

Interestingly 46% or 39 of the respondents that participated in the survey this year also did so last year. That means that 54% of the school districts that responded were different from last year’s participants. Twenty-six of the respondents that completed the 2023-24 survey last year did not fill it out this year.

Survey Respondents:



Administrator = 25
Teacher = 42
EE/SF Coordinator = 25
Pupil Services/Guidance Dept. = 2
Community Volunteer = 1
Building & Grounds Coordinator = 1
Other = 2
*Note: some held multiple titles

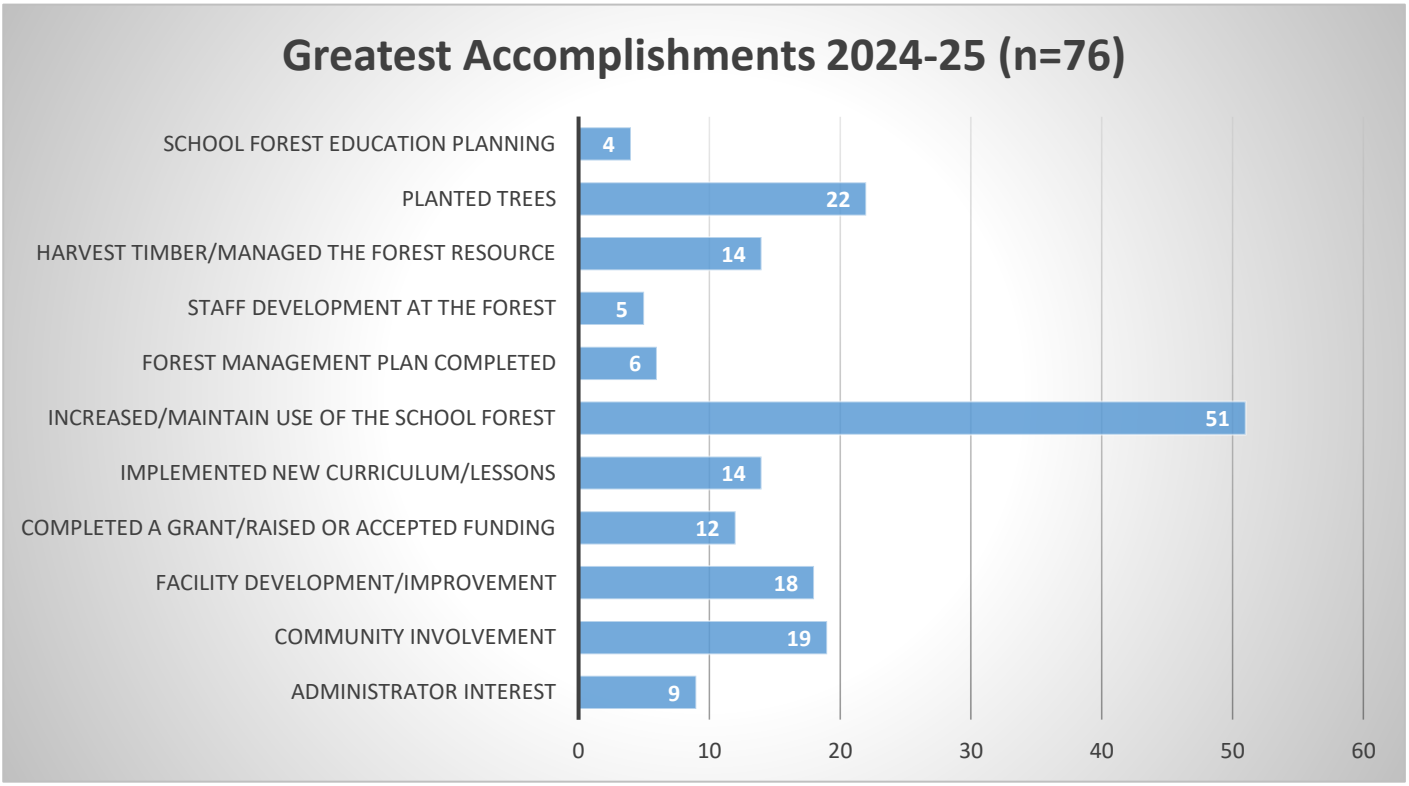
GRADE LEVELS TAUGHT or Administered:
Early Childhood: 10
Elementary: 26
Middle School/Jr High: 32
High School: 45
Post Secondary: 1
Many respondents listed multiple.

SUBJECTS/CLASSES TAUGHT:
All subjects: 15
Specialty Areas:
Art: 4
Agriculture Education: 23
English: 6
Environmental Ed: 1
Math: 3
Physical Education: 9
Science: 21
Social Studies: 7
Special Education: 3
Technology Education: 3
Other: 9 (PBL, Alternative Education, Outdoor Education, Librarian, Retired Community Member)

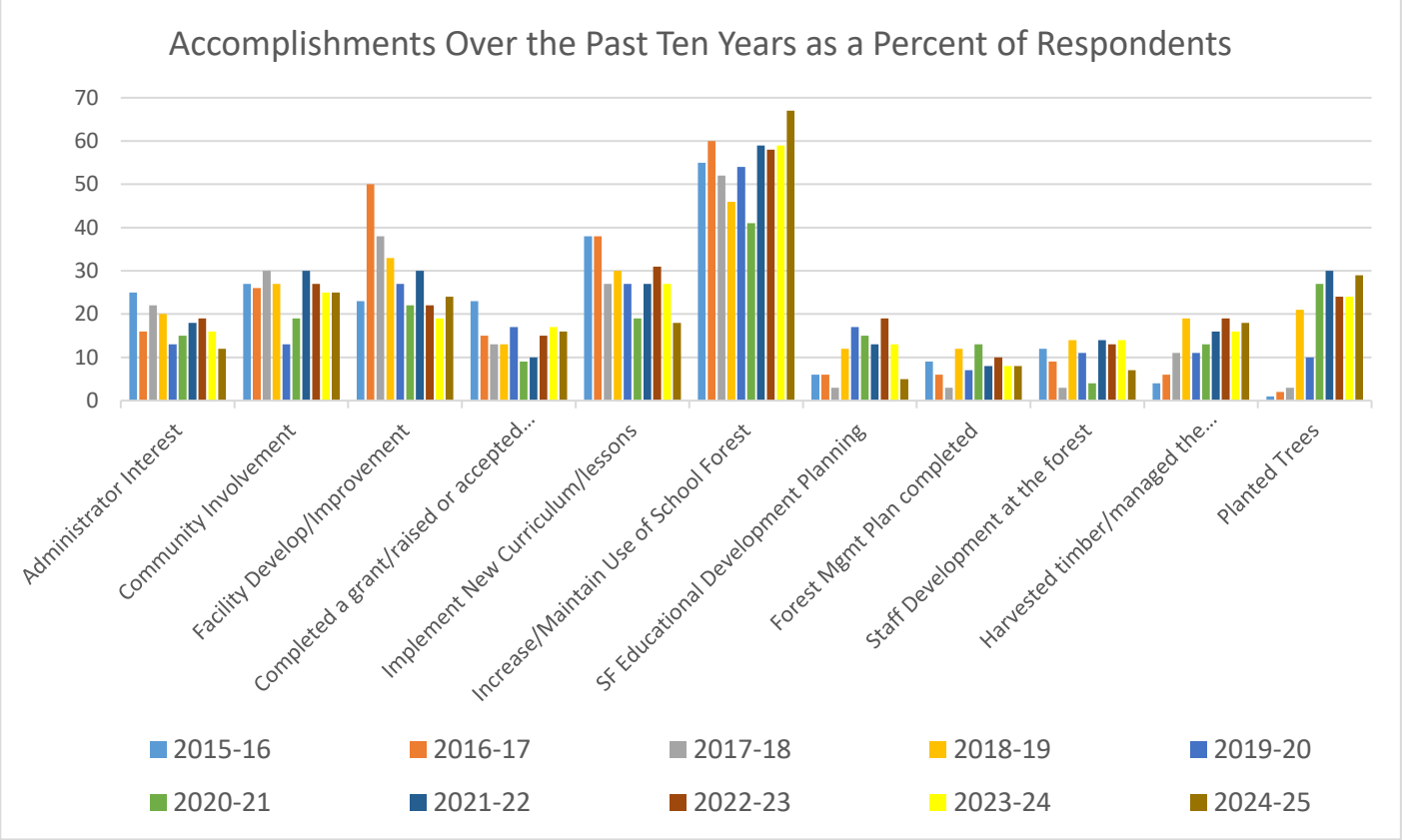
School Forest Success:

Greatest School Forest Accomplishments

Responses indicating the **district's greatest school forest accomplishments** in the 2024-25 school year: Administrator Interest 12%, Community Involvement 25%, Facility Development/Improvement 24%, Completed a Grant 16%, Implemented New Curriculum 18%, Increased/Maintained Use of the School Forest 67%, School Forest Educational Planning 5%, Forest Management Plan completed 8%, Staff Development Opportunities 7%, Harvest Timber /Managed the Forest Resource 18%, and Planted Trees 29%. The chart below indicates numbers reported.

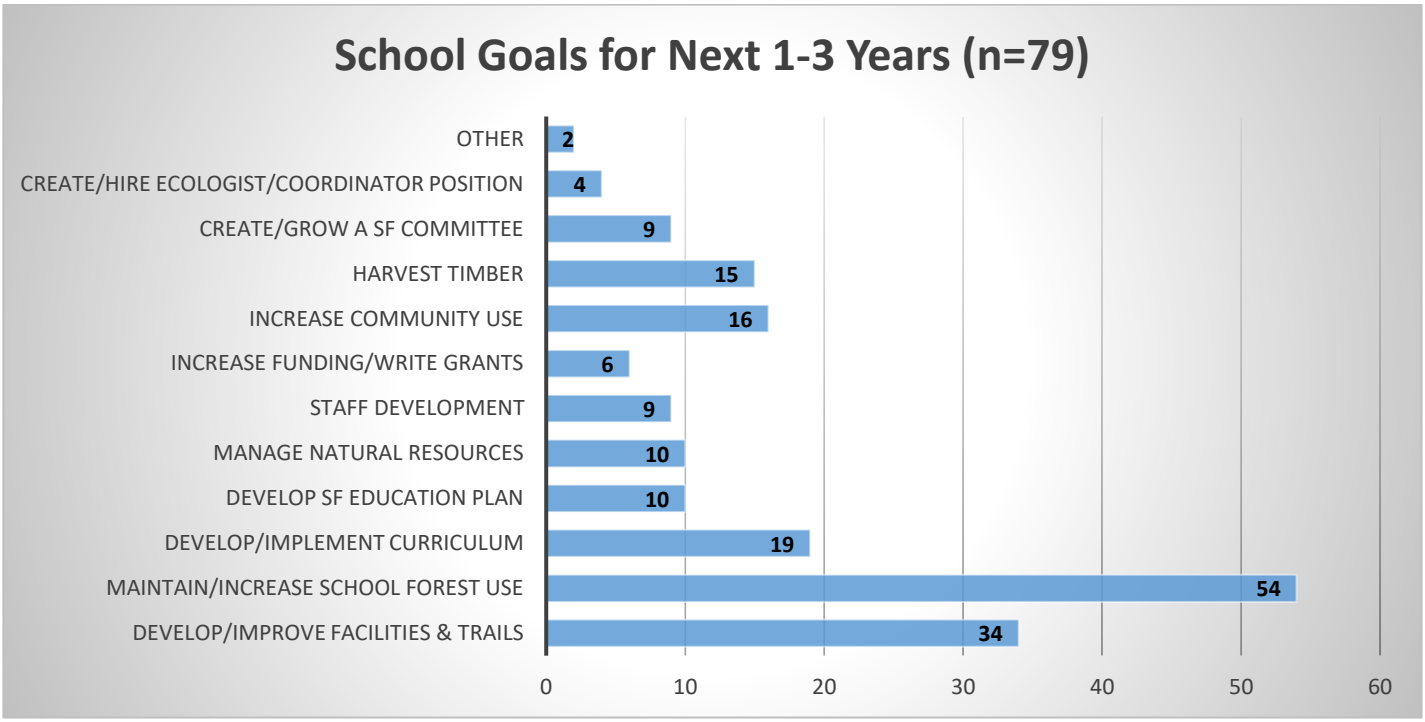


The **comparative data** figure below, shows which school forest accomplishments were identified over the past 10 years. Certain trends have begun to emerge with *Increasing or Maintaining the Use of the School Forest* as the top accomplishment recognized by school forest programs across the state. Other top accomplishments include implementing new curriculum or lessons, community involvement at the school forest, and tree planting.



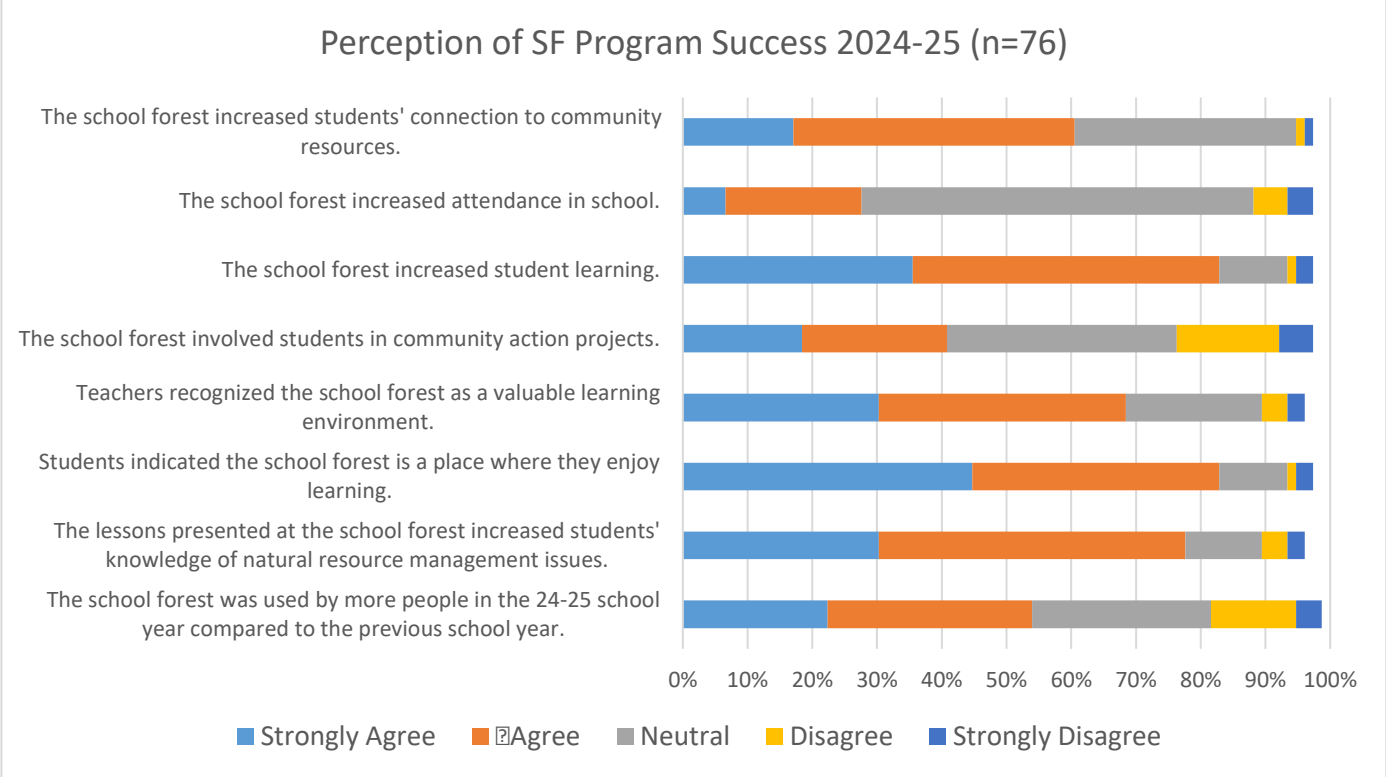
Goals for the next 1-3 years

The main school forest goals cited by the schools for the next three years were to maintain or increase the use of the school forest, develop or improve the facilities and trails, and to develop or implement curriculum to use at the school forest. The chart below shows school forest goals listed in each category by 79 respondents.



Indicators of school forest success for 2024-25

Seventy-six (76) schools responded. Results are listed as percentages.

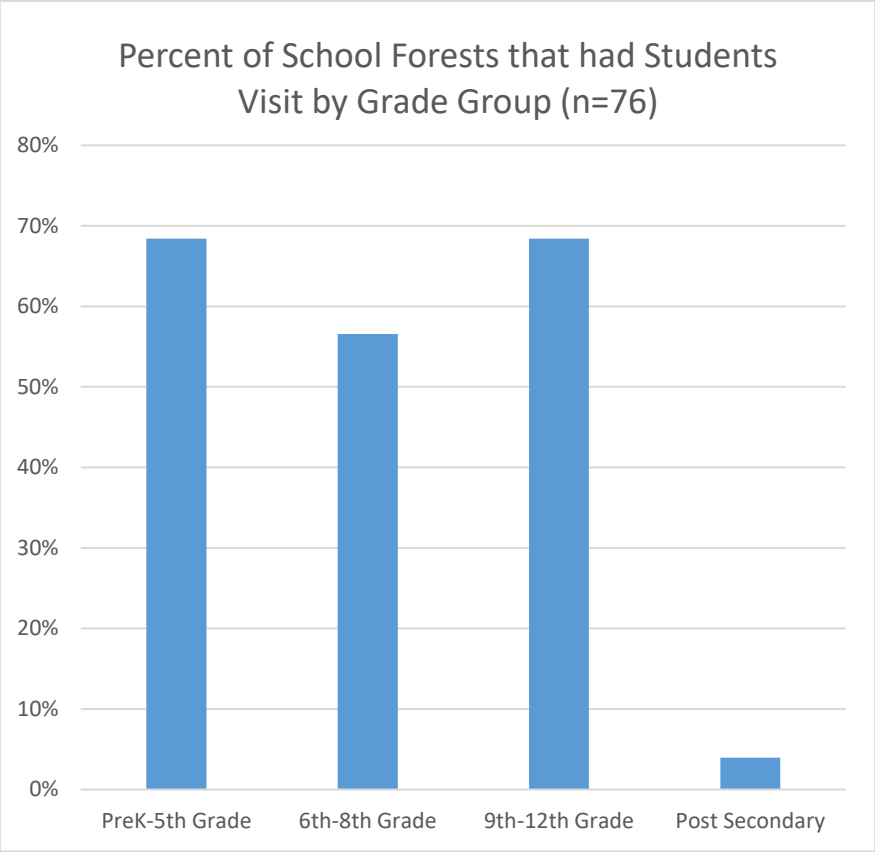


School Forest Utilization during the 2024-25 School Year:

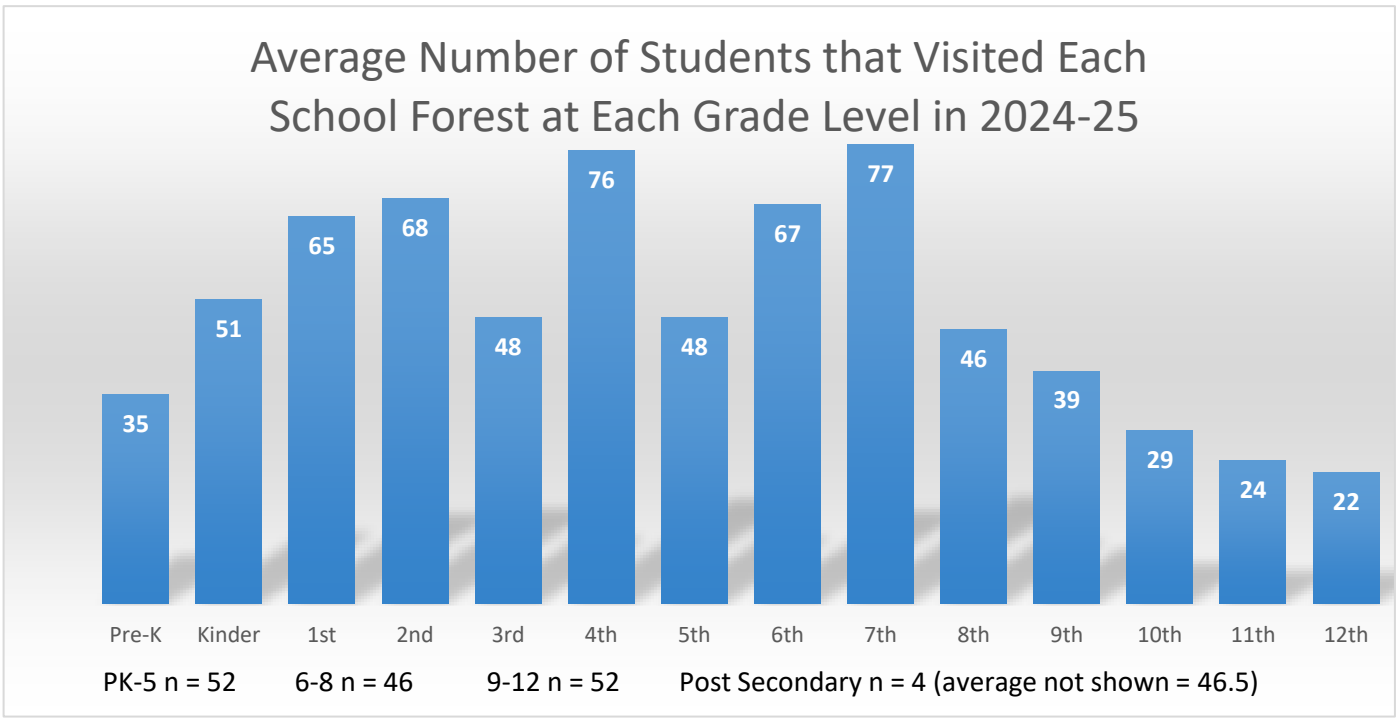
Student Visits

The following data have been calculated from the number of school districts that responded for each grade level. More comprehensive data are available upon request.

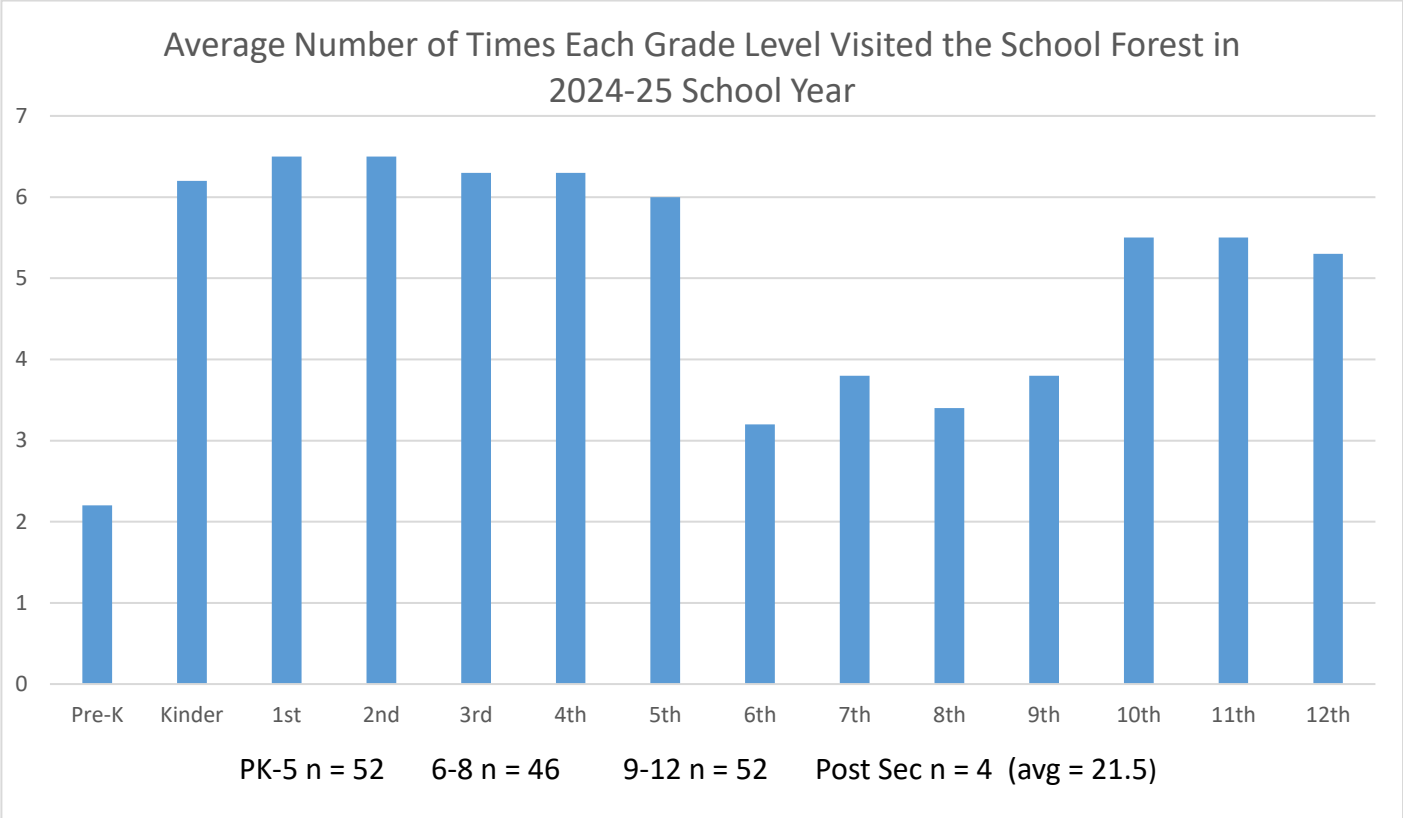
- **School Forest Use.** Respondents indicated that 68% of the forests had visits from PreK-5th grade students, 57% had visits from 6th-8th grade students, 68% had students in 9th-12th grade that visited, and 4% had post-secondary students.
- **Number of Students.** A total of **35,126 students** visited school forests during the school year. In reality, this total number is much higher. Many school forests that have daily field trips to the forest did not respond to the survey. The average number of students from each grade level that visited their school forest can be seen in the chart below.



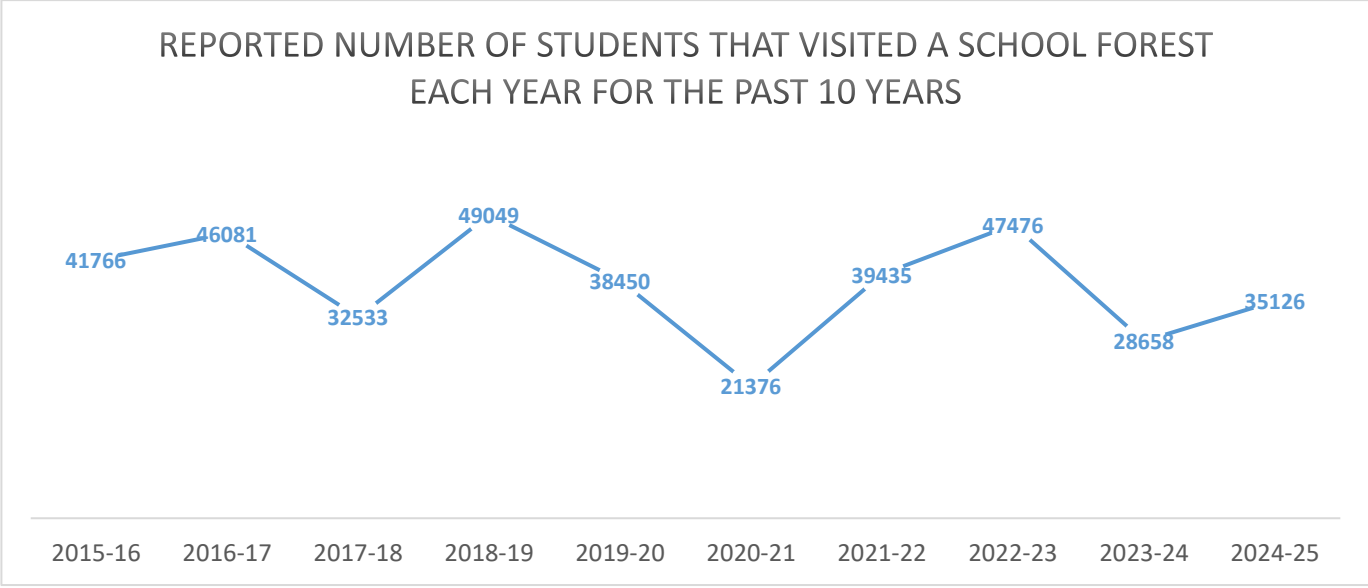
* The number of students per grade level reported is as follows: 1,819 Pre-Kindergarten, 2,641 Kindergarten, 3,387 - 1st grade, 3,548 - 2nd grade, 2,475 - 3rd grade, 3,962 - 4th grade, 2,500 - 5th grade, 3,072 - 6th grade, 3,546 - 7th grade, 2,099 - 8th grade, 2,010 - 9th grade, 1,494 - 10th grade, 1,242 - 11th grade, 1,145 - 12th grade, and 186 Post Secondary students.



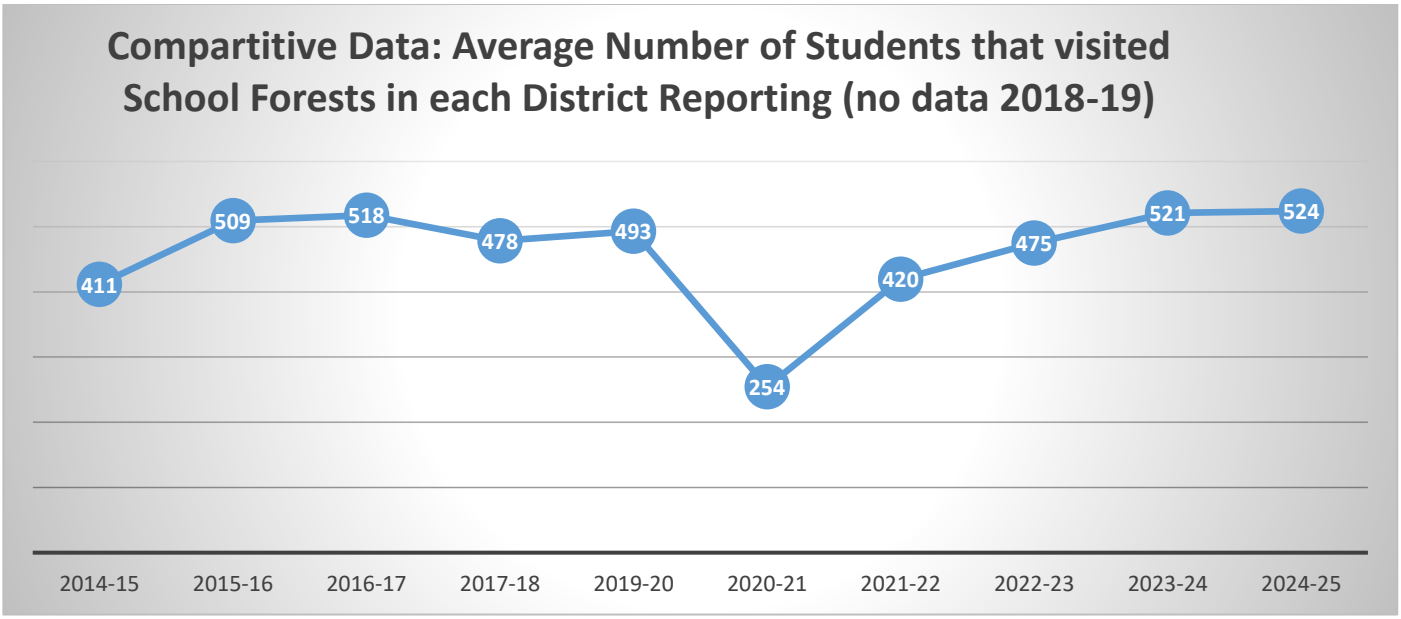
- **Number of Trips.** Respondents reported a total of **3,691 field trips** to school forests in Wisconsin. The **average number of times** (trips) each grade level visited the school forest can be seen in the chart below.



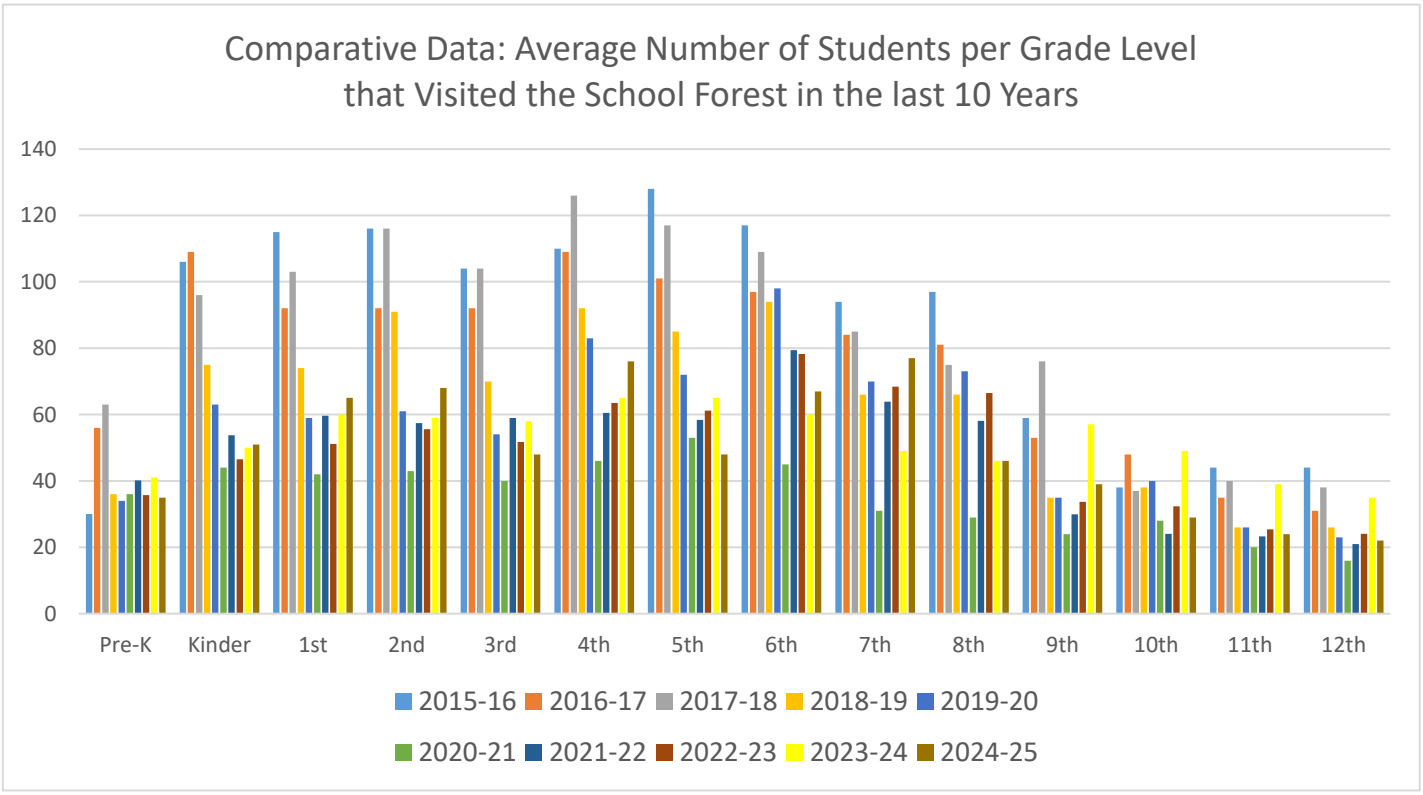
Comparative data regarding the total number of students who visited school forests each year is a **minimum estimate** of the actual number of students who visited. This figure is calculated from the survey results submitted by school forest educators, however, it is known that not all schools who had students at the forest completed the survey.



A graphic that enables for more meaningful comparison is seen below. We have calculated the average number of students that visited per district reporting. This helps to compensate for the year-to-year variability in number of survey respondents. Results are in the figure below. Clearly, there was a decline in school forest use during the pandemic as students learned from home. Numbers have rebounded to the highest level in the last 10 school years.



Comparative data below show a trend in the decrease in the number of students that visit the forest as they increase in age. Middle and high school class schedules limit the amount of time a teacher can spend with each student. Many teachers are not able to make it to the forest and back with their students during the class time. Another difference is high school students are visiting the school forest with a specific course and not necessarily as an entire grade-level as is common in the elementary grades.



What are students learning at the school forest?

Evidence of Student Learning as a Result of School Forest Experiences

The following examples were recorded by respondents as both formal and informal evidence of student learning that has taken place during student field trips at the school forest.

- Students have learned how to plant and care for trees, harvest apples, as well as take water samples from our monitoring wells.
- Arbor Day observation, planted 3000 red pine seedlings.
- Land management seminar students worked collaboratively with the Haunted trail seminar students to plan then build a new trail that was to be used for the 2024 Haunted Trail fundraiser. Land Management students also worked collaboratively with the woodworking seminar students to design, build, and install a new entrance billboard. In the one acre school Forest prairie, students completed a fall replanting from foraged native prairie seeds. In the spring, they did a species survey to see which plants were thriving, and which plants may need to have additional seeding cycles for success.

  We have a trout stream, Rock Creek, that flows through our school Forest that has been slowed and dammed by beavers. This spring, students learned how to do a modified Wisconsin Frog and Toad Survey by learning native frog and toad calls, and learning about their habitat needs and behaviors. Then, students went into the field in small teams and did an auditory survey for frog and toad calls. Students then gathered together their data, and decided which of the five sites within the school forest produced the most calls so they knew where they had the best chance of gathering live specimens.
- Increased student animal survey opportunities. We hosted 2 bioblitzes that resulted in connections to university and community experts for increased learning related to local herptiles, birds, forest management, forest history, and forestry careers. The maple sap/syrup program continues to expand and become more integrated across grade levels and subject areas.
- I notice that students are more observant of phenology throughout the year, making connections with other months or seasons. They also gain understanding of our woodland food web, and the various roles different groups play. With our recess walks, the same children always come, creating some good friendships over similar interests, **and enjoyment of being (as they say) "peaceful in the quiet woods", and collaborating on restoration activities**. So it is a good place for wellness/well-being, social learning too.
- Maya's project--research ruffed grouse and their habitat; assessed the Tracy Lake parcel for habitat needs/development; reseeded a wildlife opening; collaborated with US Forest Service and Pine Curve Forestry; collaborated with 4th grade teachers and created a lesson plan for 40 4th graders; taught 4th graders stewardship & habitat development at Tracy Lake. **This student is now at UWSP majoring in forestry and was awarded a 2025 Wisconsin School Forest Award for the work mentioned here and completed while she was a high school senior!
- Offered a new High School course in Forestry & Natural Resources, where students explored topics of environmental policy, land use, water resources, forestry-related careers and wildlife management. Students who took this course spent time in the school forest while learning. Our 3rd - 5th grade students attend a school forest day every year, where different presentations related to the forest are presented to students. Students look forward to this day. This year they learned about logging, blacksmithing horse shoes, fishing, creating art with what is found on the forest floor and identifying items in the forest.
- A DNR wildlife camera has been monitored by students. Because of Ice storm damage, students have not been allowed in the school forest due to safety issues. We hope to have that taken care of by the start of the 2025-26 school year.
- We tap trees every year from 4k-2nd grade so the kids do this for four years in a row, By the time they are in 2nd grade they are maple syrup pros!
- I have a school forest right on site at Lake View Elementary and we use the school forest on grounds each and every day.
- High Marq routinely uses our two school forests for our weekly field experiences (e.g forestry, soils, snapshot WI ,etc.). This summer the school district is offering a program for middle school students to do nature based literacy and math instruction in the school forest.
- We actually had less connection to the school forest this year as we did not offer the forestry class in favor of other electives. I am hoping we can develop new courses and integrate forest studies into already existing courses in order for us to make more use of the resource.
- We had to harvest a portion due to pine disease and now are building the footings for a prairie restoration.

- Students have been learning about trees. The class has an adopted tree. Students made bark and leaf rubbings and measured the circumference of the adopted tree. We made observations as to the health of the tree. Finding scars where limbs have been removed, splits and variations in the bark. Students made note of the lcolor change in leaves, signs of animal habitat - birds (nest in tree), bugs (woodpecker holes), squirrels (witnessed one running down the tree). Students sat on yoga mats to draw a seasonal (fall) picture of the adopted tree in their journals. We then used kindergarten sight words, sound out words and science (nature) words to write about the tree. The writings/drawings are displayed on student lockers.
- Students have learned how to manage a forest ecosystem regarding timber harvest. Students have worked with our local forester on measuring and identifying which trees should be harvested.
- I have seen students develop awareness of how to build structures for survival themselves as well as build habitats for small creatures. **I have also witnessed increased comfort in being within a forest, and I have seen students develop an interest in the natural world.**
- In 4K, the teacher continued to implement weekly walks in the woods throughout the school year. Mrs. Highlander's 4K family hiked nearly every trail, affectionately adopted a tree (known as the #1 tree), observed signs of the seasons, and SOMETIMES they were quiet enough to see wildlife. They were expert trackers identifying deer, rabbit, and racoon tracks and loved helping the helicopter seeds spread a little farther.
  The wildlife class made observations and students kept a journal for 4 days - what they hear/see/smell/etc. and the wildlife they interact with. The outdoor recreation course used it for disc golf, walks on the trails, and fishing in the river. We also use the maple trees for demonstrations on sap collection & follow up with a presentation in the classroom about the maple syrup process. Collected sap from about 10-13 trees.
  In addition to student use, we were also able to use donated funds to complete our story walk project. We had story walk posts and boards installed last year and this year we were able to add a story and share with the community. Our maintenance department continued to work on cutting back invasive growth and maintaining trails for the community and cross-country meets.
  Lastly, we had a generous tree donation given to the 4K class and the students worked together to plant about 10 new pine trees. They were expert diggers and have made promises to come back and check on their trees when they graduate as seniors.

Sustainability through School Forests

The school forest was used to help students understand the forest's economic, social, and environmental importance in the community in 42 (or 53%) of the schools that responded. The following examples are a shortened list that indicate how the school forest was used to help students understand the economic, social, and environmental impact it has in the local community.

- It is used as an example of the multiple use concept taught in the middle school agricultural classes on Forestry as well as the forestry classes.
- 4th graders each chose a tree for the year, and calculated age and CO2 sequestering to demonstrate even a 9-acre forest can sequester CO2 beneficially. 3rd graders planned a view pollinator plant research project to see if larger clumps of flowers would attract pollinators better, and could those clumps then spread seed into newly cleared buckthorn free areas.
- We hosted several community events (Open Houses for each season, Barn Dance, 4H meetings). Volunteers and donations from a local church led to the planting of over 30 trees in our Food Forest.
- During the 3rd - 5th grade school forest event, the logging presentation brought further awareness to the economic impact forests make.
- Scouts, and various classes and grade levels planted nearly 300 trees to help keep the wooded area healthy. Students removed invasive species. The School Forest Trail has become part of the Ice Age Trail and this has increased awareness and pride in the area. A sign has been created that designates the area, has QR codes to talk about environmental and educational philosophies behind the plan, the history of the land, and the background of the project.
- In October of 2024, the Gillett School District hosted a Log-A-Load event where ALL students in the school district went out to learn about the forestry industry and parts within it, including the economic, social, and environmental impacts it has on the local community.

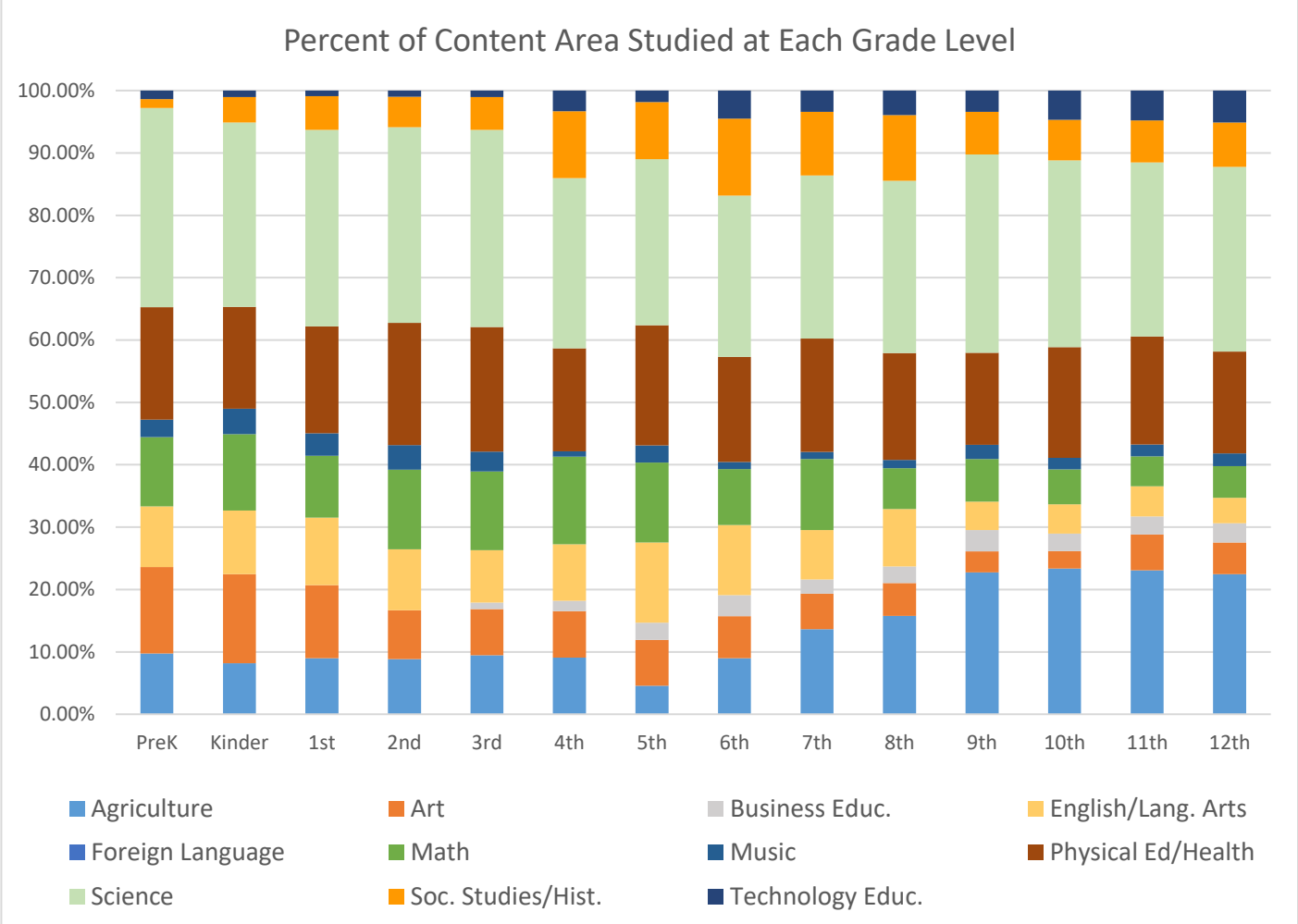
- Every year students plant trees and native plants/seeds, students tap trees to make maple syrup, students remove invasive species. Our school forest is also a place for community gatherings...we have hosted concerts in the woods, school bonfires, and candlelight hikes. Every week we include a "Weekend Fun in the Hartland North Woods" bit in our school newsletter that highlights a way for families to get outside and explore some part of the school forest.
- We hold an event at school that focuses on conservation and sustainability. We bring in vendors and organizations that have this focus within their companies and students get to see actual careers that focus on our schools campus and what it offers.
- All of our envir classes focus on these sustainability topics and our rec department also holds classes for adults and kids in the community to stress these same topics.
- Yes! We hosted a 'Futures in the Forest' last fall for over 600+ students! There were 20+ stations set up throughout the trails of the forest, focused on educating the students with a variety of forest related topics, careers, products, etc.
- Autumn Candlelight Hike (community event in collaboration with Kinnickinnic River Land Trust and Community Education);
  Seed Collection (middle school students, school forest committee member, USFWS): students helped collect and sort seeds, which were then planted in the classroom;
  Tree Planting (Renaissance Charter Academy students, school forest committee members, WI DNR): 20 students planted 400 trees, giving them a new learning experience, outside of their comfort zone, and a sense of pride and contribution to the forest, the community, and the greater natural environment.
- Students have learned about the habitat and taken an active role in improving the area. Students planted trees and welcomed families for a night hike! We used the school forest as a part of improving mental health and spending time in nature.

Forest Products from School Forest

Ten (10) of 76 school forests (12%) that replied to this question had students involved in **making value added forest products** from the school forest that are sold or donated to the community. They indicated those products included firewood, maple syrup, benches, and bird houses. Maple Syrup was produced in 6 of the 10 respondents' school forests.

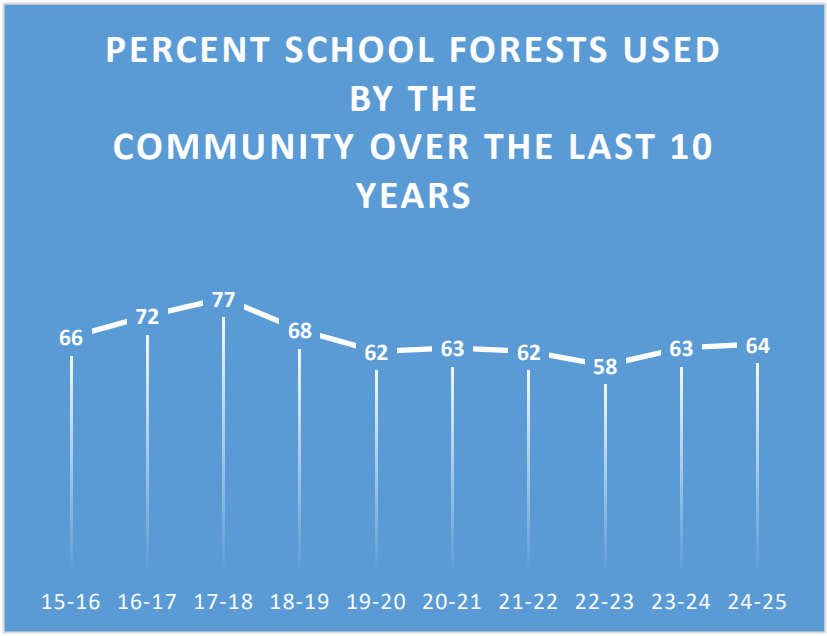
Subjects Covered by Lessons at the School Forest

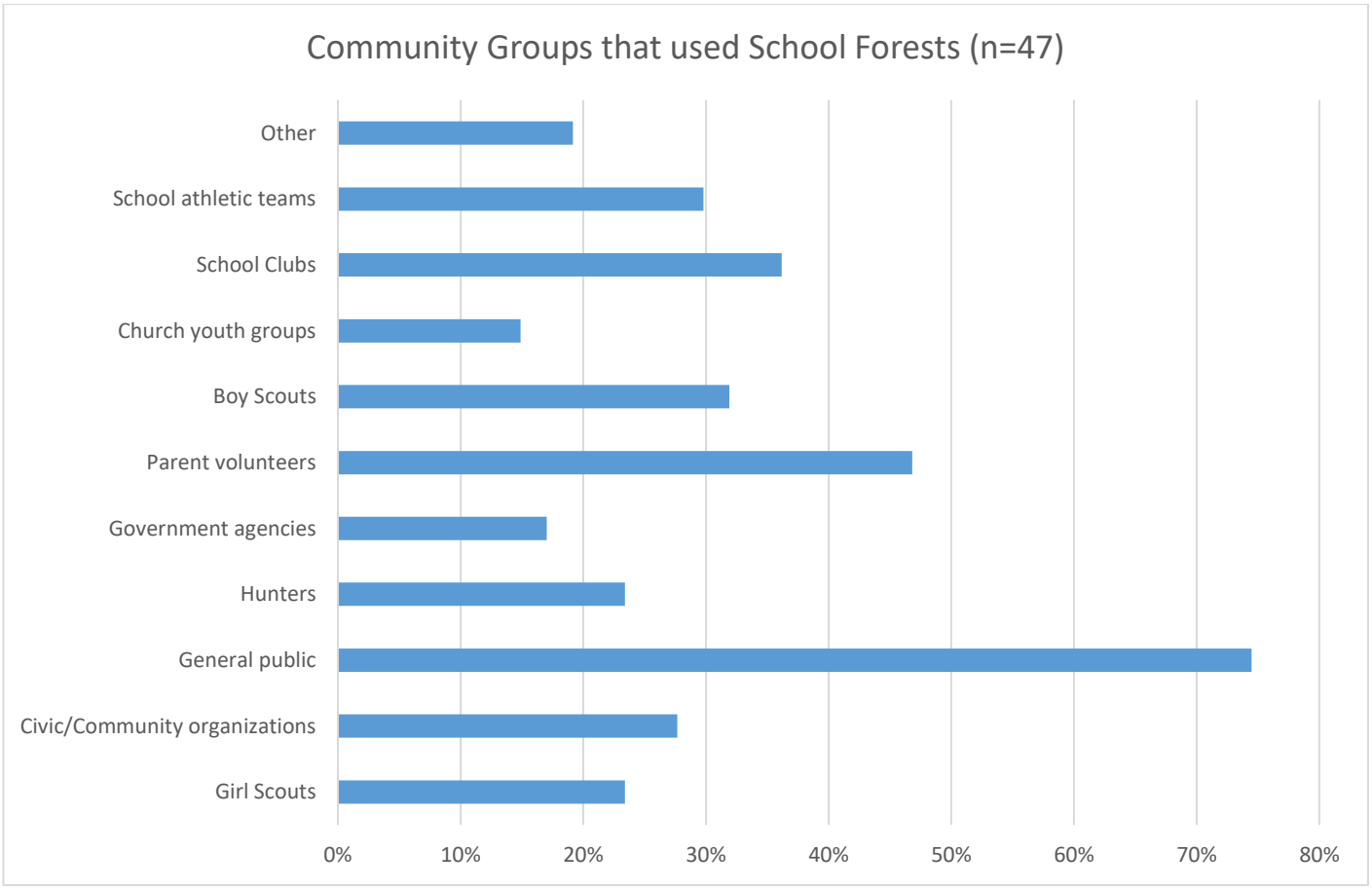
Respondents identified which **subjects were covered in lessons** students learned about while at the forest. Respondents could choose from the options found on the charts below. The following chart shows a comparison of the subjects covered throughout each grade level. Science is the most learned subject at the school forest for all grade levels followed by Physical Education. Other subjects which were taught above 10% at 6 or more grade levels were Math, Agriculture and English-Language Arts. All subjects surveyed were covered by at least one grade level. This supports the principle that school forests are not only a place to learn about the forest resource itself, but are also places where students can learn about many other subjects and concepts.



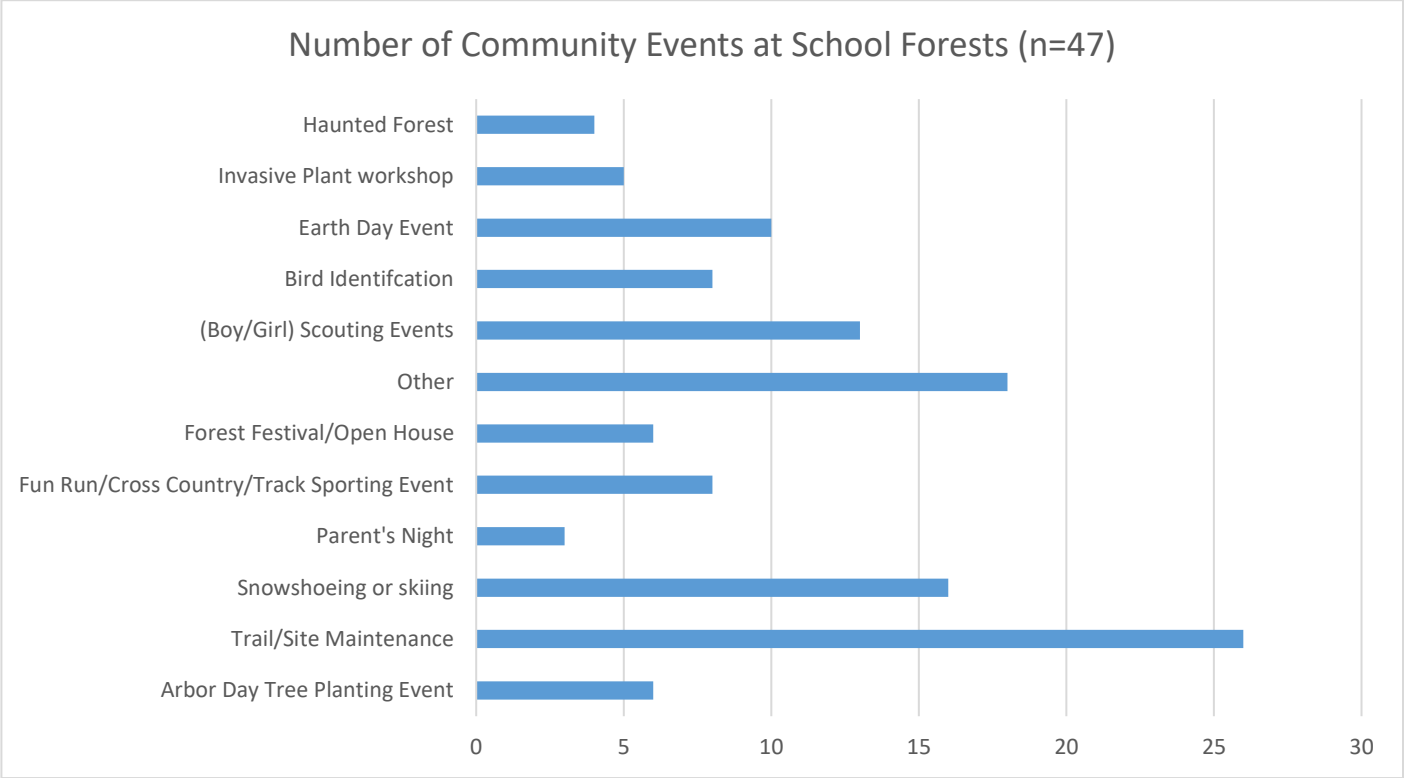
Community Use of the School Forest

- **Community members** used 49 (64%) of the school forests in the school districts that responded (n=76).
- **Collectively**, 16,784 community members utilized the 49 school forests that responded "Yes" to the question.
- The number of community members that used the school forests **ranged** from 2 to 7,500 people.
- **Utilization of the school forest** was highest from the general public, including recreational use excluding hunters, since that was its own category. The districts indicated boy scouts, girl scouts, church youth groups, hunters, school clubs, local organizations, parent volunteers, government agencies, and school athletic teams also used the school forest.





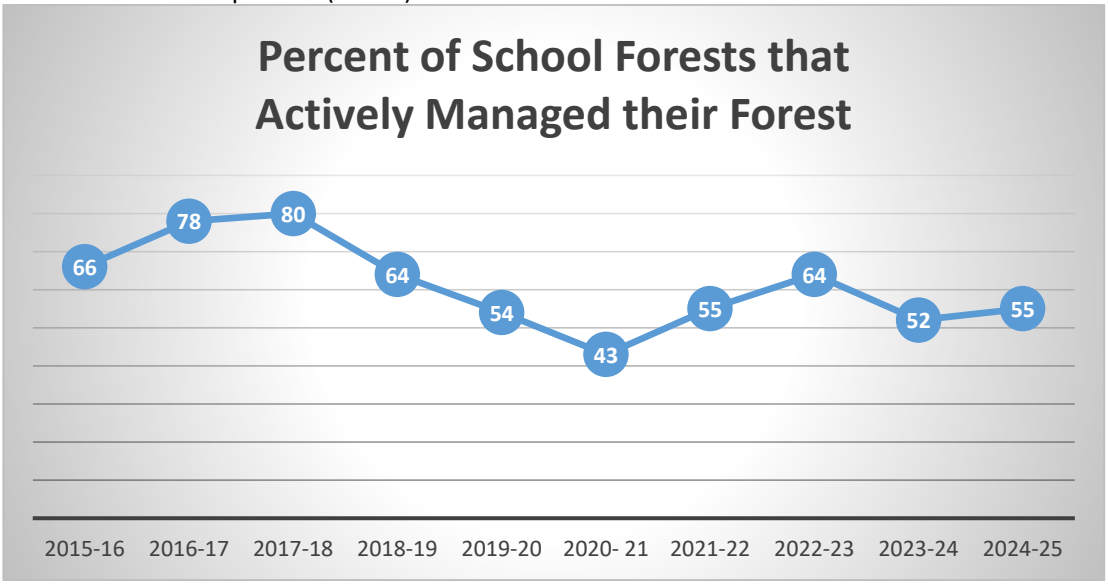
- **Community events** were hosted or provided by 47 (or 62%) of the 76 school forests that responded. The type of community event is seen in the chart below. Other examples of various special topic events reported: wedding, public maple syrup event, religious services, classes for public, ie. mushroom ID, concerts, NRF field trip, BioBlitz, family night hike, story walks, sheriff department trainings.



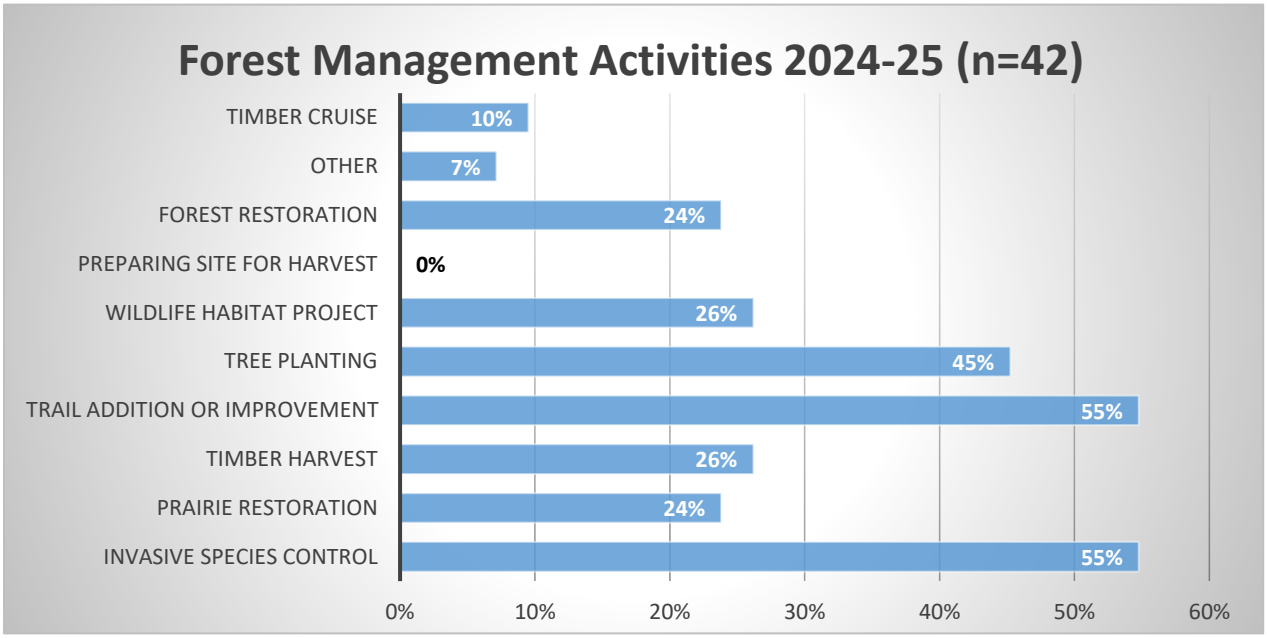
- Community members or local community organizations were **involved in helping manage** the forest's natural resources at 30 school forest events among the 47 forests in which community events were held. This included invasive species control, trail/site maintenance, and tree planting.

Forest Management

- **Sustainable forest management activities, lessons, events, or programs** have occurred on 42 school forests or 55% of the districts that responded (n = 76)

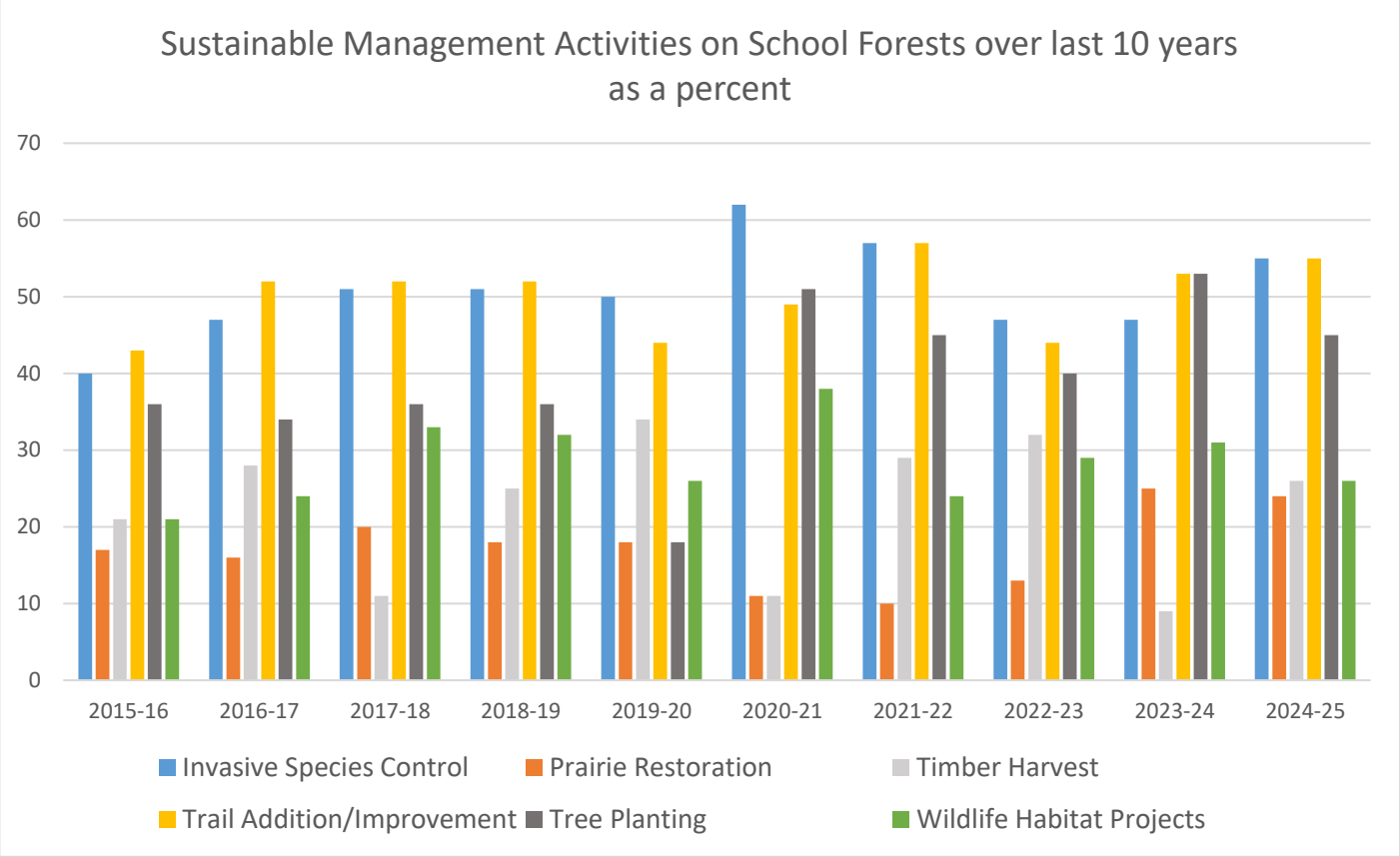


- Forty—two survey participants (n=76) responded to **the type of sustainable forest management** that occurred on their school forest. Invasive species control and trail additions or improvements were the most common management activities cited in just over half of the forests that carried out sustainable forest management. Tree planting was also common at 45%. Other management included forest restoration, timber harvest, prairie restoration, and wildlife habitat projects.



- Thirty-eight percent of the total survey respondents indicated the **next management activity** would take place within the next year, 3% indicated 1-5 years, and 1% indicated more than 5 years. Sixteen % of the respondents indicated a management activity but did not list a date for it to be completed.

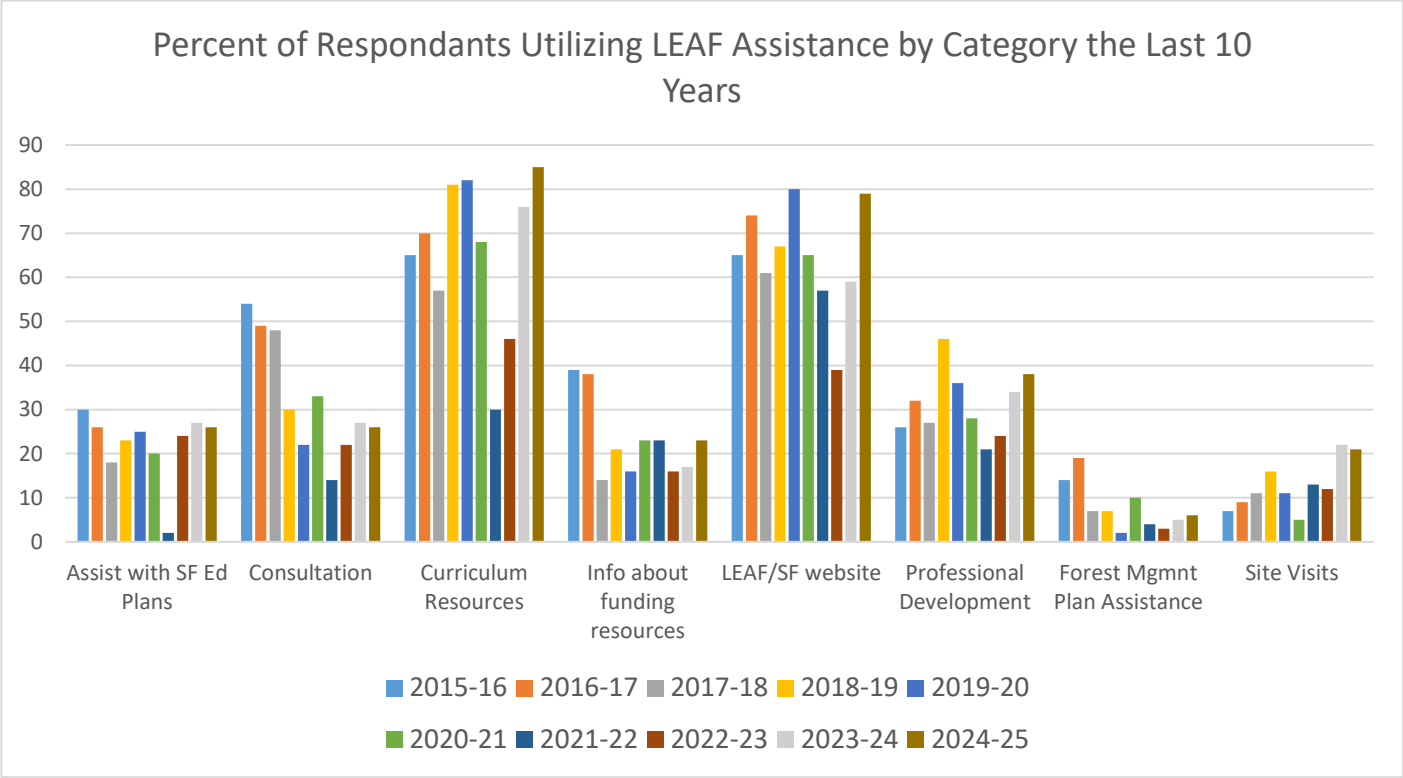
Comparative data for the past 10 years show that the most common management activities implemented at school forests are invasive species control and trail additions or improvements. Harvesting timber or preparing for a future harvest is a critical part of sustainable management at school forests and occurred at more than 20% of the responding forests 7 of 10 years. More than a quarter of reporting forests harvested timber in 2024-25, up from a relatively low 9% 2023-24. Tree planting continues to be one of the top 3 activities in recent years.

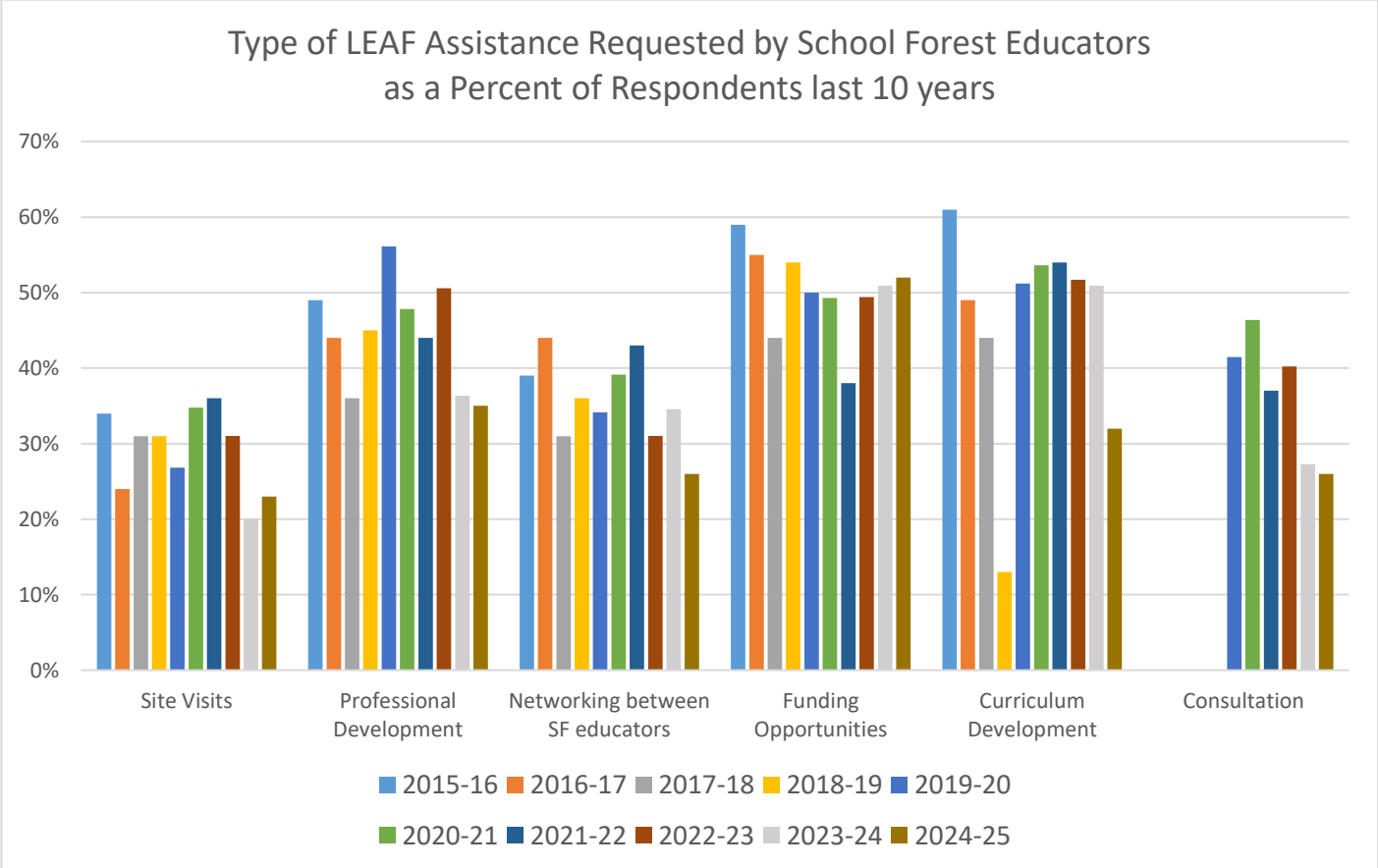


LEAF and School Forest Assistance

- The LEAF School Forest Program provided assistance to 62% of the school districts that responded to the 2024-25 school forest survey.
- To the school districts LEAF provided assistance, it was provided in the following areas: 85% received help with curriculum resources, 79% consulted the LEAF/School Forest website, 38% received professional development, 26% received consultation services, 26% received assistance with school forest education plans, 23% were provided information about funding resources, 6% received assistance with forest management plans, and LEAF visited 21% of the school forest sites from this sample.
- Eighty-seven percent of respondents identified **further assistance** is needed with the following distributions: 26% consultation with the School Forest Education Specialist, 49% to develop curriculum resources, 52% to find funding opportunities for school forests, 35% would like professional development opportunities for staff, 26% asked for networking between school forest educators, and 23% requested school forest site visits.

Comparative data in the charts below indicate that school forest educators rely on LEAF's services and those services are valued.





School Forest Personnel:

School Forest Committees:

- Were found in 36% of the responding districts while 64% of the respondents did not have a committee

Does the district have an official **School Forest Coordinator** or person in charge of school forest programming?

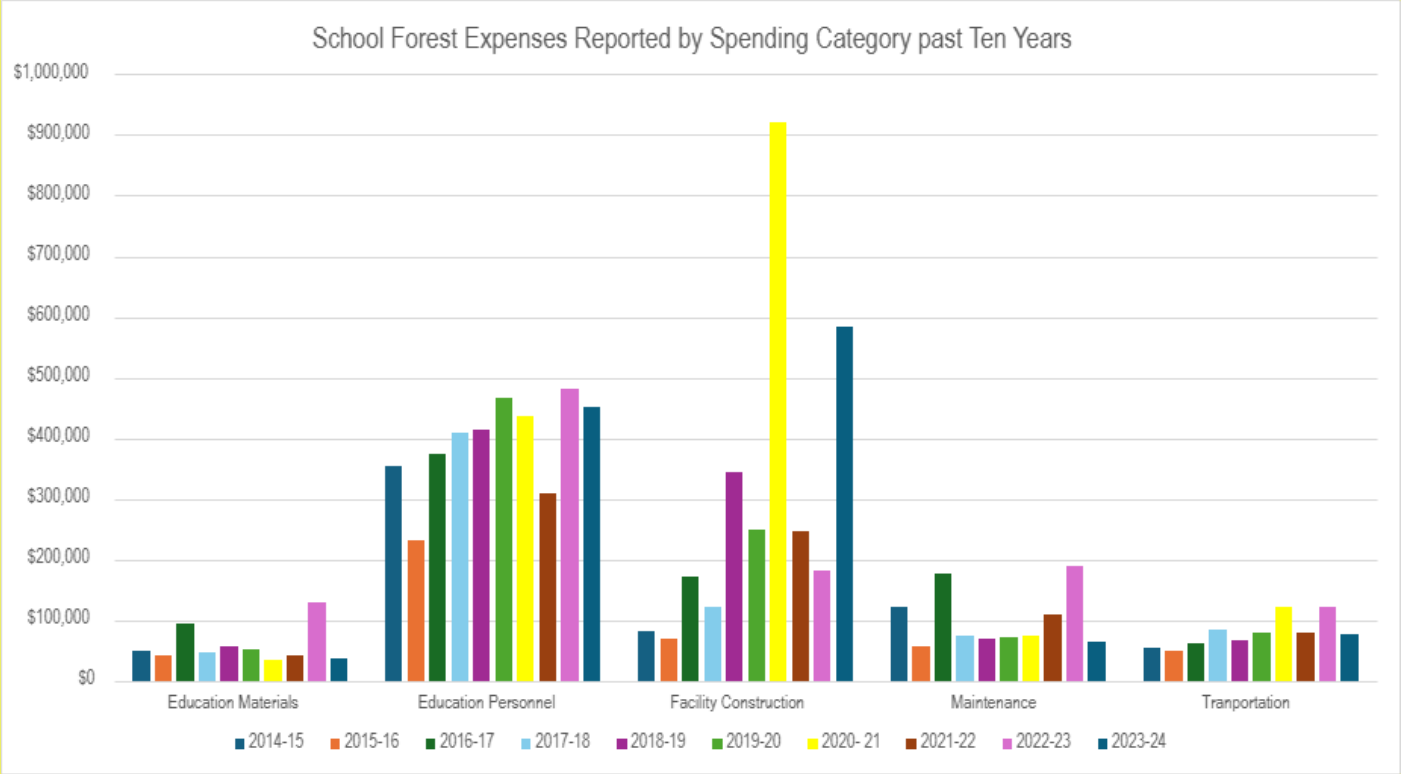
- Forty-four percent of respondents have a school forest coordinator while 56% do not (n=80)
- Twenty-nine percent of respondents replied that their school forest coordinator volunteers; 25% are paid part-time employees while 4% are paid for full-time work.

School Forest Budgets

2024-25 School Forest Expenditures

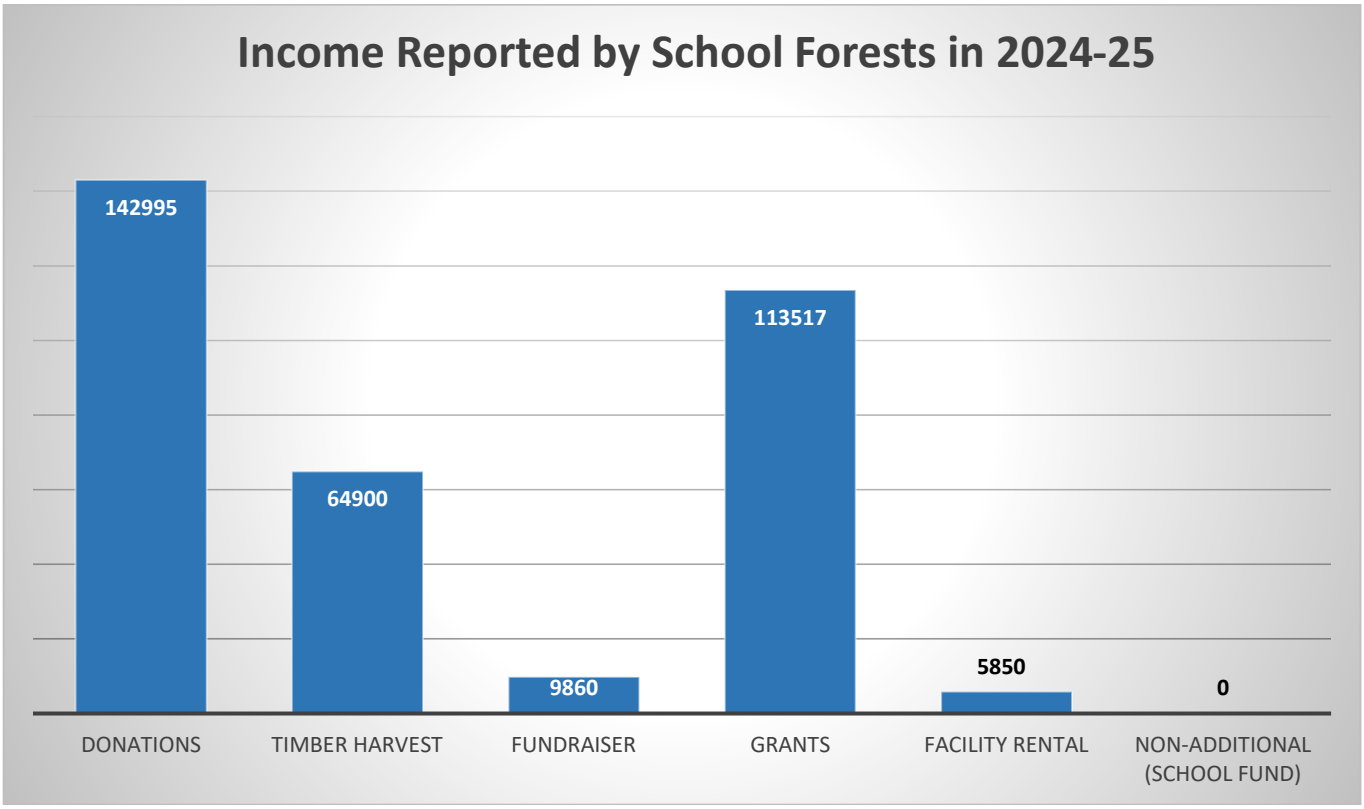
The following school forest expenditures were reported on the survey:

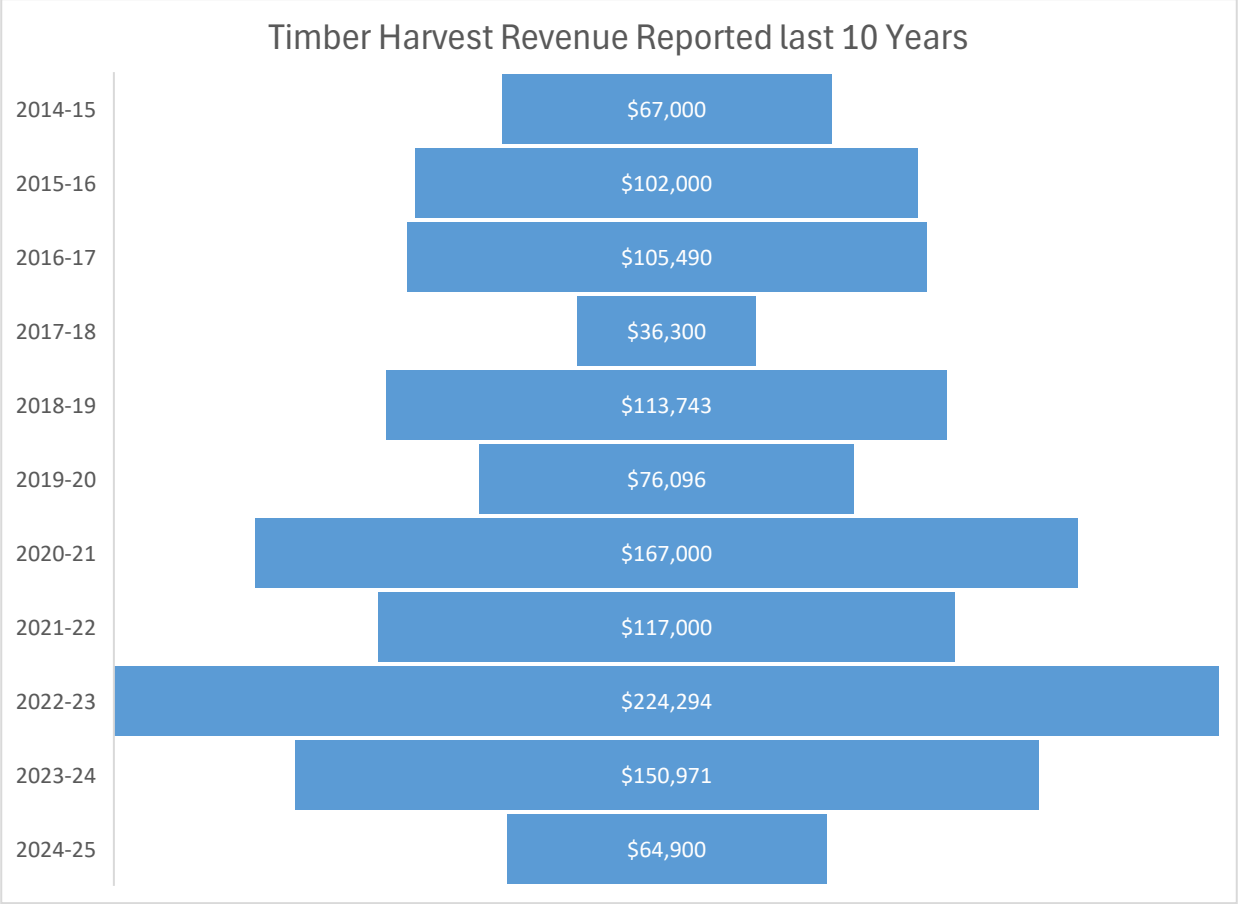
- School districts spent a total of $48,570 on **education materials** for their school forest programs. This calculates to an average of $648 per school district that responded. The maximum reported was $11,000. Seventy-two percent of school districts reported that no money ($0) was spent on school forest education materials.
- School districts spent a total of $382,175 on **education personnel** for their school forest programs. This calculates to an average of $5,096 per school district that responded. The maximum reported was $200,000. Seventy-three percent of school districts reported that no money ($0) was spent on school forest education personnel.
- School districts spent a total of $95,100 on **facility construction** for their school forest programs. This calculates to an average of $1,268 per school district that responded. The maximum reported was $45,000. Eighty-seven percent of school districts reported that no money ($0) was spent on school forest facility construction.
- School districts spent a total of $103,500 on **maintenance** for their school forest programs. This calculates to an average of $1,380 per school district that responded. The maximum reported was $14,000. Fifty-five percent of school districts reported that no money ($0) was spent on school forest maintenance.
- School districts spent a total of $100,234 on **transportation** for their school forest programs. This calculates to an average of $1,336 per school district that responded. School districts indicated a range of $0 to $28,000 was spent on transportation to and from the school forest. Sixty-five percent of school districts reported that no money ($0) was spent on school forest transportation.
- Thirty-four percent of school forests reported no spending in these five categories in the 2023-24 school year.



2024-25 School Forest Income

Thirty-two percent of the school districts in the survey reported their school forest had generated income in the 2024-25 school year (24; n=76). A **combined total of $337,122 was generated** from school forest land or programming. Income from the school forest was generated from the following categories: timber sales occurred at 25% of those forests reporting any income and generated a minimum of $64,900; 10% of the school districts generated money for their school forests through fundraisers and raised a total of $9,860 , 13% of the districts generated $142,995 through donations, 8% of the districts raised money through facility rental recovering $5,850, and 25% of the these districts reported gaining $113,517 through grants.

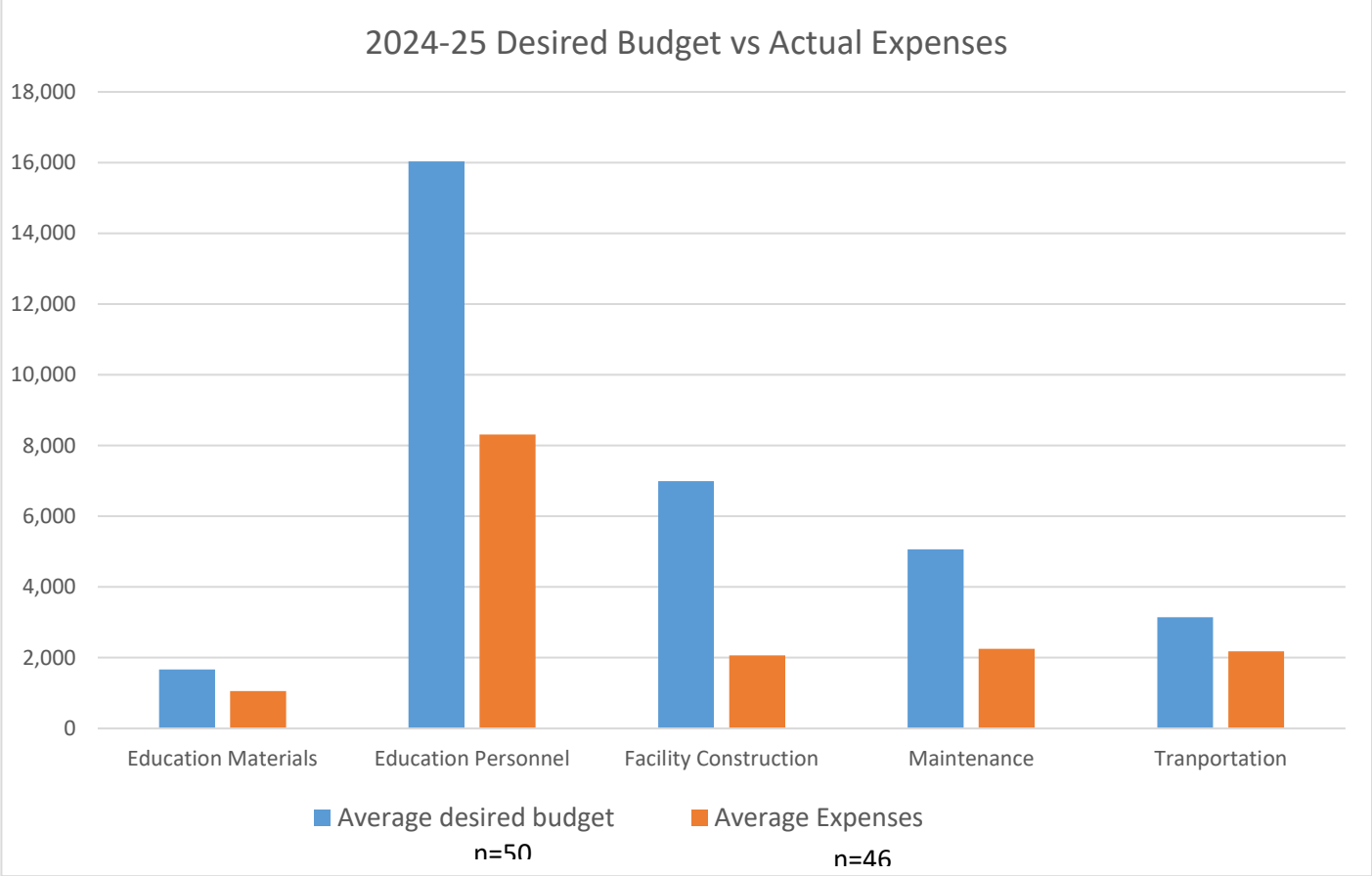




Desired Annual School Forest Budgets

The following information is what school districts indicated would be their desired annual budget for school forest programming:

- School districts would like a range of $0 to $11,000 to spend on **education materials** for their school forest programs. The grand total desired for school forest education materials from all of the districts that responded is $83,500. This calculates to an average of $1,113 per school district that responded.
- School districts would like a range of $0 to $250,000 to spend on **education personnel** for their school forest programs. The grand total desired for school forest education personnel from all of the districts that responded is $801,850. This calculates to an average of $10,691 per school district that responded.
- School districts would like a range of $0 to $100,000 to spend on **facility construction** for their school forest programs. The grand total desired for school forest facility construction from all of the districts that responded is $349,600. This calculates to an average of $4,461 per school district that responded.
- School districts would like a range of $0 to $50,000 to spend on **maintenance** for their school forest programs. The grand total desired for school forest maintenance from all of the districts that responded is $253,250. This calculates to an average of $3,377 per school district that responded.
- School districts would like a range of $0 to $30,000 to spend on **transportation** to and from their school forest programs. The grand total desired for school forest transportation from all of the districts that responded is $157,350. This calculates to an average of $2,098 per school district that responded.



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