

OUTDOOR LEARNING CASE STUDY

Village Elementary School

Suburban Coastal District · 223 students
(175 in person, 48 remote) · Serving grades K-1 in York, ME



Building Collaboration With a Longstanding Nature Based Organization

York, Maine is a coastal community at the southern tip of Maine and home of Mount Agamenticus. The public Village Elementary School is steps away from the York River which flows into the Atlantic Ocean. The school shares land with the town and has large field space behind the building, two natural classroom areas with stump seating, and access to a nearby trail system.

The local White Pine Programs, a nature-based youth organization with programming held on nearby land trust or private lands, has been a fixture in the town since the 90s, and some families choose to send their young children there once a week instead of Village. As a new principal of Village in 2018, Beth Hutchins brought decades of experience in special education and an interest in creative ways to support all students' learning and engagement with school.

In 2019, Hutchins met with Heather Campbell, the Executive Director of White Pine to brainstorm potential ways that their educational programs could work together. Both were especially interested in the ways that this partnership could allow all students, regardless of economic status, a chance to meaningfully engage in outdoor learning, something that can too often be a privilege for children with parents who have free time and resources for outdoor adventures. While the idea of a "Forest Friday" weekly rotating outdoor special with White Pine instruction was appealing to both Campbell and Hutchins, it was met with some resistance from the local school committee; some committee members had concerns about outdoor learning being outside of the purview of a public school and considered it the parents' responsibility. Due to this and a lack of grant funding, the idea did not move forward at that time.

A year later, when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the US, Hutchins and Campbell met again (virtually). They also worked with other York schools administrators to explore different ideas. Their goal was to get students learning outside as much as possible. They decided to approach it, again, as a special: each K-1 student would experience outdoor learning class once a week.

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BENEFITS



Student behavioral improvements



Shared and equitable experience



Improved student morale



Increased student engagement

TOOLS FOR CHANGE



Dedicated School Outdoor Learning Staff



Administrator Championing Outdoor Learning



Existing Relationships with Outdoor Ed. Organization



Outdoor Gear to Ensure Equitable Access



Designated Outdoor Classroom Spaces

*"There's so much loss for kids and families right now. **This is a bright spot, this is something they really look forward to, and talk to their families about.**"*

—Heather Campbell, White Pine Programs Executive Director



Using New Funding Sources to Build Outdoor Learning Program

With funding from the CARES Act, Village Elementary hired Pam Whelan-Roy, a well-known and respected local educator with experience in curricular standards, to coordinate alongside Debbie Lyons, a lead educator at White Pine with an M.A. in Environmental Education. Together, the two began planning a program that would enable them to support Village teachers in outdoor learning activities.

While planning began in summer 2020, the community came together to get the school's outdoor areas (which had been built 15 years prior) ready for use as classrooms. York Parks & Recreation cut back areas overrun by wild rose and bittersweet, spread wood chips on the ground, and set up tree stumps (given by local tree service companies) for use as stools.

Gradually introducing outdoor learning to kindergarten and first grade students was a crucial part of the process. Initial lessons brought them outdoors to simply look around and pay attention to their surroundings, and students became familiar with the routine of moving outdoors and were later able to have more robust lessons outside that fully incorporated learning standards, like exploring natural patterns outside in connection with a math unit on the topic. The lessons incorporate video introduction to a topic (to work around complicated COVID-pod protocol) and in-person exploration outside. While a portion of the Village student body is doing remote learning, those students can participate virtually through the video lessons, and have access to the shared gear like snowshoes as well.

As the weather grew colder, Village Elementary connected with Maine Needs, a grassroots community donation center, to ensure all students had access to enough warm layers. Local churches and Knights of Columbus also supported the school with clothing and gear donations. A donation from the York Beach Fire/Rescue allowed for the purchase of 27 snowshoes from Kittery Trading post.

While the first months of the outdoor learning at Village were covered by CARES funding (as a supplemental, non-budgeted expense), the spring semester program has been supported by grant funding from the Davis Conservation Foundation and the Onion Foundation and the use of the school's "field trip and cultural activities" line item in the principal's discretionary fund. Clearly, principal and administration support have proved crucial for the program's ongoing success.

Moving forward, students, guardians, Hutchins, and Campbell see outdoor learning at Village as a key part of student learning experience, not just a short-term COVID workaround. They hope that making clear the benefits of outdoor learning on student engagement, excitement, and performance will lead to its ongoing funding in the budget.

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"The children who tend to have a harder time sitting down in the classroom, who are fidgety—they are really thriving in our program.

Outdoor learning is a whole different way of tapping into their creativity. Then they come back to the classroom feeling ready to learn."

—Heather Campbell, White Pine Programs Executive Director



"Outdoor learning at school supports child development by building a fund of experiences and memories for kids to connect new knowledge to."

—Beth Hutchins, Village Elementary School Principal

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS



White Pine Programs

Outdoor Classrooms:

York Parks & Recreation

Gear Support:

Maine Needs

Local churches & Knights of Columbus

York Beach Fire/Rescue

Kittery Trading Post

Funding Support:

Davis Conservation Foundation

Onion Foundation