

OUTDOOR LEARNING CASE STUDY

East Grand School

Rural District · ~140 Students · PreK-12th grade
Serving northern Washington County, ME
Access to nearby nature/land - woods, parks etc.



Outdoor Learning Provides New Focus In the Face of Potential Closure

The East Grand School in Danforth has a longstanding and well-established Outdoor Education (OE) program. Easy access to trails paired with a rich array of surrounding recreational opportunities has resulted in student experiences in activities such as canoeing, camping, biking, hiking, rock climbing, downhill skiing, snowboarding, and beginner training for recreational guiding. Students also engage in community service projects such as campsite restoration and trail building and maintenance.

The OE program is focused primarily on building responsibility and lifelong outdoor and recreational skills. Staff leadership by OE/PE Instructor Tammi Matula and Co-Instructor Dave Conley has been crucial for its success and sustainability, as have strong partnerships with the community and organizations.

Although high quality outdoor programming has existed at the East Grand School for years, the school has not always been an “outdoor school.” In 2014, in the face of financial strain, low enrollment, and potential closure, the grassroots efforts of Citizens Organization for Rural Education (CORE) emerged. CORE pushed to stimulate enrollment by shifting the focus of East Grand to use one of the region’s most prominent assets—the outdoors—and making East Grand more relevant and attractive to families.

With support from the community, administration, and board, East Grand School OE programming took off. As it began planning for an extensive outdoor classroom, the school brought in Korah Soll of Rural Aspirations who helped to guide the development of new programs and curriculum from

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BENEFITS

- ✓ **Community involvement & connection**
- ✓ **Students are engaged and enthusiastic**
- ✓ **Students develop lifelong practical & emotional skills**
- ✓ **Teachers drawn to the school’s outdoor learning culture**

TOOLS FOR CHANGE



Connecting with other schools



Administrative & board support



Community partners



Outdoor Infrastructure: Classroom & Trail



Staff patience & creativity



Designated outdoor learning staff

"Education can be tricky, because sometimes it doesn't feel like real life, but now it feels like real life."

—Tammi Matula, teacher



the ground up to align and focus on outdoors. A new principal with a heart for outdoor learning attracted more teachers who care about teaching and exploring outdoors. A partnership with TimberNook, an outdoor programming children’s organization based on occupational therapy principles, provided professional development support to school staff, focusing on the therapeutic value of outdoor learning with a scientific lens. East Grand was the second public school in the US to adopt this training.

Growing in Changing Times

All this momentum has resulted in considerable equipment and a sizable storage building, functional and well-established outdoor learning spaces, a network of public trails maintained by students, a bike fleet and repair program, a school garden, sustainable well-researched outdoor programming, and rich relationships between the school and community. The OE program has also evolved to become integrated into the school day, instead of being seen as supplementary. At East Grand, students learn how to be “comfortable with the uncomfortable” as they develop their skills and learn to anticipate and respond to obstacles and even failure. Challenges still exist—including varied student preparedness and access to equipment, and time constraints around outdoor space preparation—but the benefits of the OE program are clear. Students are taking ownership, developing foundational practical skills, and strengthening their self-esteem through achievement.

The ability to connect with others—the local community, other schools, professional development programs, outdoor learning professionals—has been foundational in the growth and sustainability of East Grand’s OE program. Key to success are strong board and administration support, community investment, and long-term relationships with partners like Rural Aspirations and TimberNook who can share the “why” of outdoor learning to teachers.

Because of East Grand’s years-long initiative to further develop and incorporate outdoor learning throughout the school day, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 met a school that was already teaching students creatively outdoors. The school accessed CARES Act funds to invest in new outdoor structures, acquire a shed for material storage, transform an old shed into a barn and start a garden (with a local 4-H partner), and continue professional development with TimberNook. Funding from the Sewall Foundation and Maine Environment Education Association allowed for further support of outdoor classrooms and learning materials. At East Grand, outdoor learning is part of the educational system of the school, but it takes ongoing effort, staff passion, support, partnerships, and a lot of patience to make it thrive.

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"We chose to use the outdoors as our calling card."

—Tammi Matula, teacher



COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Elmina B. Sewall
FOUNDATION



Rural Aspirations Project

