

Outdoor classrooms benefit student learning: www.heraldtimesonline.com

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The pressure is on. Improving test score results, increasing literacy, proving that the schools are meeting the standards — these drive the school year.

Teachers used to be able to design their own creative projects, have freedom to experiment, engage students in open thinking, and have control of their classroom.

We could devote this article to discussion of what this is doing to teacher morale, how it has changed the school program, whether we are really getting any better results than when we went to school, etc.

But let's suppose we propose an experiment to Tony Bennett. Let's promote thinking about teaching strategy incorporating using the outdoor areas around the school grounds, at the local park within walking distance or even paying for an occasional field trip to a natural area. Sycamore Land Trust's educational program does just that.

Here's what we do and here's what we find: We work with the motivated teacher who likes to engage kids in exploration, discovery and reflection. We'll look at a unit currently being taught and say, "Well, how could we do something out of doors to meet some of our mandated goals?" So we create an activity that reinforces classroom concepts and provides extensions, cross-curricular synergy, and definitely "hands-on." The kids are already excited. We're going "outside the box", meaning out of the four walls and into our environment. Armed with tape measures, magnifiers, calculators and calipers, we slip into the woods on our "bug hunt." Now the science word "habitat" becomes real.

When we calculate square footage in our plot, count creatures, talk about density of organisms, measure the insect's body parts with calipers, inspect the "poda" of arthropoda, well, this is real stuff. When we measure tree diameters, circumferences, calculate volumes and find tree heights by angles, the math makes sense now — it is a practical application of the classroom concept. We believe it sticks. When we have children sitting on the edge of a bluff looking at a meandering stream and writing their observations of nature, we're building that love into them. We would propose that teachers really begin to think of possibilities here. We have even done art in the park and singing in the woods, and find that children are happier, free, stimulated, questioning and creative.

Wow, could this even increase ISTEP scores? Let's experiment!

The daily regimen on teachers today certainly isn't very conducive to this method, but we encourage some new thinking. It goes nowhere without support. Really it is going to have to flow from the top down: the Department of Education, the superintendent, the principal, the parent. Do you see value in using our outside world for children's learning? We do. Every day.

Carroll Ritter is environmental education coordinator for Sycamore Land Trust and is a former teacher.

Judy Morran's students at Edgewood Intermediate inspect the prairie they created with help from Sycamore Land Trust.
Carroll Ritter | Courtesy photo

