

Earth Day at an E.A.R.T.H. School: Past, Present, and Future

By Lily Albright *Principal Unionville Elementary School*

A year ago, on Earth Day, Unionville Elementary students, with shovels and seedlings in hand, worked together to restore the nearby woods. It was a warm day filled with the unmatched energy and joy that is experienced by children engaged in learning outdoors. Today, those same students celebrate Earth Day remotely. And like everyone else in the world, they reflect on past experiences and on their present condition, while working to reconcile the space between reality and expectation. Their reflection is a universal experience in the world of COVID-19. We can all relate to the thought sequence of 1) reminiscing (It was a wonderful time!), 2) mourning (But wait, we had plans!), and 3) restoring hope (What can I do? What's next?).



Reminiscing: It was a wonderful time!

Last year, we had the experience of accepting a donation of over 200 native hardwood seedlings from our local newspaper. Staff members from The Herald Times dropped off the trees to eager teachers who put them in the hands of the students. We partnered with Sycamore Land Trust Environmental Education Director, Shane Gibson, to teach each student about the anatomy of a tree and the proper methods for planting the seedlings. Groups of

students ventured out with their teachers and classmates to contribute to the collective effort of introducing over 200 native hardwoods to our woods. The day was a huge success and a model of the power of partnerships and environmental education. The seedlings exist today (well, most of them) as thriving examples of the work of our young environmental stewards.



Mourning: But wait, we had plans!

Earth Day is a big day for our small and mighty school. We coined the acronym E.A.R.T.H. (Environment, Art, Resources, Technology, and Health) to capture our vision for teaching and learning and refer to ourselves as an E.A.R.T.H. school.

Each year, Earth Day, provides an opportunity to celebrate our unique vision and to engage in a project that makes the world a better place. Before closing our school doors this year, we had plans to partner again with The Herald Times and Sycamore Land Trust. We were exploring ways to expand our impact and to engage families in the work of reforestation. The trees were ordered. The day was chosen. We were moving forward. Then, halt! Stop! COVID-19!

Restoring Hope: What can I do? What's next?

Our original plans did not play out. We took a moment to grieve the loss of our idea and have moved on to considering alternative plans. We embrace and embody the phrase that "action is worry's worst enemy." Though we haven't finalized our "plan B," the act of brainstorming and planning is positive energy forward. It is a move toward the future. It is an act of hope, an act of positivity, and an act of resiliency.

Today, this Earth Day, though we aren't engaging in the collective planting of hundreds of trees, we can engage in the collective acts of kindness to our Earth. Everyday, but particularly on this day, find small ways to improve your world. Know that your small contribution, when paired with the work of others, makes a huge impact.

One day, we will all emerge from the age of COVID-19, hopefully with a new appreciation for each other and our world. We will play side by side and share a shovel with a friend. Until then, as each day passes, we cycle through the process of reminiscing, mourning, and restoring - trying to remember that we will certainly laugh and play and dig again, together.



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