

Forest Service Observes “Outdoor Classroom Day”



The Delaware Forest Service’s Ashley Melvin directs Heritage Elementary students in Wilmington as they planted over 30 trees to enhance its outdoor classroom.

DOVER, Del. (May 21, 2021) – The Delaware Forest Service joined the [Delaware Association for Environmental Education](#) (DAEE) to observe “[World Outdoor Classroom Day](#)” by planting trees this week at Heritage Elementary in Red Clay School District and Allen Frear Elementary in Caesar Rodney School District. An [outdoor learning place](#) is “any place where meaningful experiences can be had in and with nature and the environment,” according to DAEE. “Outdoor learning places are especially beneficial to young students to develop the deep life-long appreciation for the natural world, our dependence on it, and its fragility. Outdoor learning places are often at schools but they can be at parks, churches, or even created in a backyard.”

DAEE is a volunteer-led alliance of professionals from natural resource agencies, nonprofits, and schools who strive to create “meaningful outdoor experiences” to enhance learning across a wide range of curriculum areas. DAEE and the “Delaware Communities in Nature”(DCIN) initiative developed Delaware’s “[environmental literacy plan](#)” in 2015. The document serves as a foundational blueprint to expand environmental education beyond traditional core STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and math) into areas such social studies, history, art, and physical education.

Delaware Forest Service education specialist Ashley Melvin is the current chair of DAEE, and the organization is urging

schools and organizations throughout the First State to join its “Outdoor Learning Network,” an initiative building an online “story map” that locates outdoor learning spaces on a map and shares them with others to build a community of learners to foster environmental education across the curriculum. Educators can then learn from others who are incorporating the outdoors into lesson plans for various subject areas.

“These outdoor learning spaces create opportunities for students to get involved and enhance their own community,” Melvin said. “It’s something meaningful that they can hopefully use on a daily basis.”

DAEE holds an [annual conference](#) every spring and fosters the Delaware “Communities in Nature” initiative. The group provides a wealth of year-round resources, professional mentoring, and enrichment opportunities for those who are looking to get started or continue their efforts in environmental education. [DAEE’s board and leadership team](#) includes representatives from the Delaware Nature Society, Delaware State Parks, U.S. Fish & Wildlife, private corporations, as well as public, private, and charter schools.

Schools or educators interested in getting more information can email DAEE at daeeonline@gmail.com

At Heritage Elementary in the Red Clay School District, students from every grade level planted more than 30 trees to enhance the school’s new outdoor classroom. At Allen Frear Elementary in the Caesar Rodney School District, the high school’s National Junior Honor Society joined fourth- and fifth-grade students to plant native trees and plants in a converted drainage basin in the parking lot. The area is now a “[bioswale](#),” an outdoor learning space near the school’s main entrance that can serve as a certified “[Schoolyard Habitat](#).” Todd Klawinski is Caesar Rodney School District’s environmental education specialist and a board member of DAEE.

The bioswale is one of many outdoor learning spaces – including [one at nearby Postlethwait Middle School](#) – that earned the district a “[National Green Ribbon School Award](#)” from the U.S. Department of Education in 2019.

According to DAEE, meaningful outdoor experiences generate benefits for students in many areas:

- Better performance on standardized metrics in reading, writing, math, science and social studies
- Reduced discipline and classroom management problems
- Increased engagement and enthusiasm for learning
- Greater pride and ownership in accomplishments
- College and career STEM job readiness.
- More chances to physically move and practice a healthy lifestyle
- Better understanding of the natural resources within the state
- A well-rounded community of people knowledgeable about environmental issues
- Increased exposure and preparation for careers and jobs where people work outdoors



David Pragoff of the Delaware Nature Society directs students at Allen Frear Elementary as they plant native trees and shrubs in their bioswale.

David Pragoff, School and Groups Team Leader at the Delaware Nature Society, touted the many benefits of the project at Allen Frear Elementary School:

“In addition to a space like this that has environmental benefits, we want to make sure that we are using it with the students so that they can enhance their science learning, or their language arts, or their math. Interdisciplinary learning in a space like this can be really powerful and really meaningful for kids.”

Pragoff outlined how outdoor learning spaces provide opportunities to help students meet curriculum objectives at every grade level.

“At the first-grade level, they’re focusing on organisms and what they need to survive. So looking at any individual plant or collection of plants, what are their specific needs? And how can we help them survive in a space like this? What are the insects? And what are the birds and other wildlife species that are brought into these plants because they are a food source or source for shelter? And at the second-grade level, they focus on soils and they focus on insects and life cycles. And so we’ve got lots of soil, and with luck, we’ll have lots of insects and pollinators coming through this space. Third grade does an earth science unit on rocks and minerals. We can look at the soil conditions and relate that back to where the soil is coming from and the change over time. Fourth grade is life cycles and land and water – so we’re looking at erosion and deposition, which is apparent all around us on the ground. And then fifth grade is looking at ecosystems more broadly, so the interaction between species and in a space like this. And that’s just the science curriculum. There’s poetry, spontaneous writing and storytelling, or math. How many plants can be supported in a certain area of space? And arts are endless. They could do sculptural installations, drawing and painting, or just observation skills.”

Just the immersive experience of students getting their hands dirty and touching nature can be an impactful experience: “Just that first step of showing them it’s okay to get your hands in the dirt. We definitely had a couple of kids who were upset that their hands were dirty and they were talking about washing their hands and were a little reluctant at first, but as they saw other people were getting engaged, they got into it. All in all, the kids did a fantastic job.

Todd Klawinski, Environmental Education Specialist at Caesar Rodney School District, hopes to see the network of

educational partnerships growing in the future. The effort is highlighted by a new web-based “story map” for Delaware’s Outdoor Learning Network with locations and features of outdoor classrooms throughout the state. In this way, educators can learn from each other about innovative ideas that can benefit and reach more students.”

“The story map we’re working on is to collect and mark out on a map where people are doing stuff like this. Whether it’s just starting something like a pollinator garden or even just planning it... that network just connects everybody,” Klawinski said.

“What DAEE is doing just moves that to the next level and identifying where all these spaces are so that people can go and see them, learn from them, and then start to expand outdoor learning spaces across the state.”



DAEE Leadership: (from left) David Pragoff of the Delaware Nature Society, Todd Klawinski of Caesar Rodney School District, Ashley Melvin of the Delaware Forest Service, and Flavia Rutkosky of U.S. Fish and Wildlife.