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Creating Tomorrow's Woodlands Today

Contrasting forests:

Evansville and Janesville school forests

Editor's note: This is the first part of a two-part series.

By Stephen Schmidt

School grounds are not always completely covered by a roof and parking lot. Where permeable ground can be found, so too often are trees that provide benefits such as shade, energy savings, flood control and beauty. When planned properly, most school grounds can provide opportunities to grow an urban forest. Students who attend a school with a woodlot or other urban forest have a wealth of opportunities to learn about the benefits of trees and their characteristics.

Registered school forests must have a minimum size of 1 acre and must be managed sustainably with help from a WDNR forester.



This change from a minimum of 20 acres has provided opportunities

for many more students across the state to enjoy the benefits of studying in a school forest, whether urban or rural. Of the more than 400 Wisconsin school forests, 85 are less than 20 acres in size.

In far south-central Wisconsin's Rock County, you can find two contrasting school forests within 12 miles of each other. Evansville's 11-acre Grove Campus School Forest is an urban forest, located on the 47-acre school district campus that includes three schools and the district office. Evansville is not what one would think of as urban, but the term urban, as related to forestry, illustrates the importance of trees in a typical cityscape. Janesville Schools Outdoor Laboratory (JSOL) is 151 acres of mostly mixed hardwood on sometimes steep terrain, which is part of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. These forests could hardly be more different,



Top photo by Butch Beedle, other courtesy School Forest

Above, students write in their nature journals at the Evansville Grove Community School Forest. Right, a student completes a worksheet at the school's indoor nature center. The indoor nature center complements the outdoor opportunities by providing a multitude of natural artifacts for students to observe up close.



yet they both provide the wonderful benefits of forestry education in an outdoor classroom.

Evansville's Grove Community School Forest Trail is accessed southeast of the district office in the middle of campus and winds around the edge of the property to the south and west.

In 2002-07, community volunteers and teachers, along with support from administrators, worked together to reserve and design spaces on the edge of campus and create the varied landscape now used by students as outdoor classrooms. In the original spirit of the school forest program to reforest Wisconsin, students planted a variety

of over 2,000 native trees and shrubs to provide habitat for pollinators, birds and other animals. Basswood, shagbark hickory, bur oak, American highbush cranberry, red osier dogwood and American plum are some of the planted species. Local Lions Club volunteers watered the plantings with a tank on wheels. Now, students can follow the trail and stop at prairie plots, wetlands, a young oak savannah and woodlots to study tree identification, find a shady spot to read a book or observe pollinators in action.

In a typical non-COVID year, community members organize outdoor days at the Evansville school forest and in-

Forest facts...

Evansville Grove Campus School Forest

- Registered in 2007
- Total acres: 11
- School district enrollment: 1,800
- School forest website: www.ecsd-net.org/district/school-forest.cfm
- Contact: Butch Beedle, retired teacher and school forest volunteer, beedle4@att.net

Janesville Schools

Outdoor Laboratory

- Registered in 1981
- Total acres: 151
- School district enrollment: 10,069
- School forest website: www.janesville.k12.wi.us/departments/jsol
- Contact: Paul Stengel, pstengel@janesville.k12.wi.us

Rock County



door environmental education programming in the nature center, located at the district office.

Outdoor days started with one sixth grade class of students completing nature stations at the school forest, local parks and prairies, and has blossomed into most K-6 grades holding at least one event. Now programming takes place on campus and nearby lakes where students learn to fish or kayak, try archery and more. Started in 2015, the indoor nature center complements the outdoor opportunities by providing natural artifacts for students to observe up close. Nature center programming takes some of the pressure off from teachers'



Photo by Stephen Schmidt

For his Boy Scout Eagle project, Evansville alumnus Barry Badeau made this outdoor lab table from milled cedar utility poles from the sports stadium.

demanding schedules, as the volunteers plan and lead activities to engage all of the students' senses.

Stephanie Johnson's fifth grade students were able to spend more time reading outdoors during COVID due to easy access to the forest. Connie Schultz stepped up to teach district fourth graders who chose to remain online during 2020-21, but in a typical year, her students use the forest to inspire poetry, write in their nature journals and study photosynthesis and tree identification.

High school students in agriscience teacher Jim Kvalheim's classes study forestry outside to help them describe wildlife habitat, learn to measure trees to model and predict the value of a harvest and learn how to properly plant and prune trees. Brian Benson's students in advanced placement environmental science have planted and tagged trees and have helped to maintain the prairie plots.

At the same time as planted trees are maturing, Evansville School Forest leadership is transitioning. Early visionaries and longtime volunteers Nancy and Philip Kress, who recently moved to be closer to family, were instrumental in starting the school forest along its path and have organized volunteers and did a lot of work in the fields. Fortunately, the network they built is still strong with retired teachers Butch and Cindy Beedle, among others who continue to organize nature activities for current teachers.

Support from administrators is another critical piece to a successful

school forest program. When the project to design and register the school forest began, then-Supt. Heidi Carvin helped to facilitate it. That support continued with the most recent district Supt. Jerry Roth who retired at the end of the 2020-21 school year. He is confident his predecessor will continue to support the wonderful outdoor learning opportunities to be had at the Evansville school forest.

Evansville educators, both teachers and volunteers, clearly provide so many opportunities for their students right on campus at the school forest. In the future, one might be able to hike from this urban forest to the Janesville Schools Outdoor Laboratory via the National Scenic Ice Age Trail. Dennis James, coordinator of the Rock County chapter of the Ice Age Trail Alliance, and team are working to finalize the Rock County Trail Plan that proposes that the trail passes Evansville on its south, merging with part of the Evansville Grove Community School Forest.

To locate these or any registered school forest, visit the LEAF Interactive School Forest Map on the school forest program page at LEAFprogram.org.



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