The Benefits of

Place-based Education:

A REPORT FROM THE PLACE-BASED EDUCATION EVALUATION COLLABORATIVE

(SECOND EDITION)

It reminds us that learning is way more than words on a page. It's water moving around our boots. It's mud and cold. It's all these sensory dimensions in the real world we're part of. If it's rivers kids are learning about, then standing in one and turning over stones to find stoneflies teaches in new ways that connect them. They gain new respect for the river. They have opportunities to see themselves as a part of something that has a long history and a long future. They become more hopeful. Through the experience they learn to become stewards.

— Teacher,
Hartford Middle School,
White River Junction, Vermont

Place-based education

immerses students in local heritage, culture, ecology, landscapes, opportunities, and experiences as a foundation for the study of language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects.

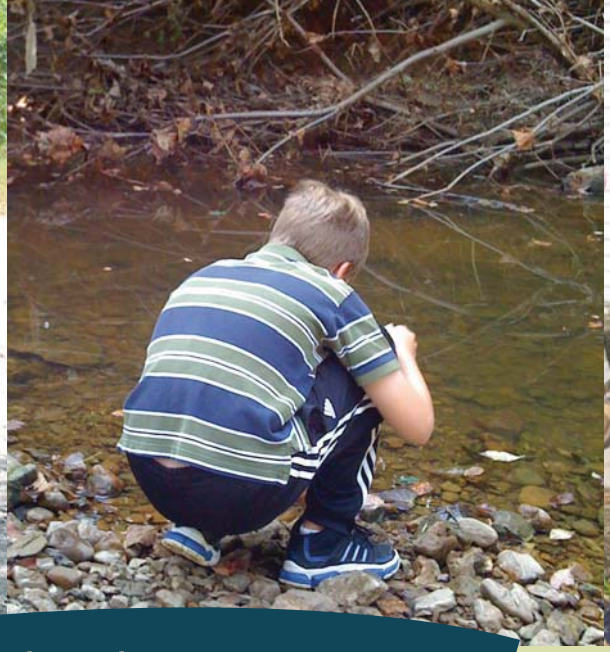
Place-based education encourages teachers and students to use the schoolyard, community, public lands, and other special places as resources, turning communities into classrooms.

Project-focused and inherently tailored by local people to local realities, place-based education is equally relevant in small towns and big cities, equally effective for kindergarteners and high school students.

The Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative is undertaking a rigorous and ongoing evaluation process to gauge the effectiveness and outcomes of the place-based education model. Since forming in 2001, the Collaborative has instituted individual and cross-program evaluations of **ten place-based education programs** representing more than **100 schools** (rural, suburban, and urban) covering twelve states.The body of evidence reflects more than **1,000 adult interviews** or focus group participants; more than **250 student interviews**; more than **900 educator surveys**; more than **2,700 student surveys**; extensive document review; and dozens of on-site observations.

The findings are clear: *place-based education fosters students' connection to place and creates vibrant partnerships between schools and communities. It boosts student achievement and improves environmental, social, and economic vitality.*

In short, **place-based education helps students learn to take care of the world by understanding where they live and taking action in their own backyards and communities.**



Place-based education:

HELPS STUDENTS LEARN

Ten studies from across the United States connect place-based education with academic achievement. (See *www.PEECworks.org* for a complete breakdown.) One study compared first-graders who had one and two years of work with a teacher who employed a strong, place-based education model. First-graders with more exposure to strong place-based education outperformed their peers on all measures analyzed. Educators at sites using place-based education models consistently report that their students have become increasingly engaged and enthusiastic about learning. "My kids were so excited about the things that they saw that I know they will look more and pay closer attention to our environment," said a teacher who participated in a place-based education program in Missouri. "Actually visiting the ecosystems helped them really understand the concepts that I was trying to get across."

The Beebe School in Malden, Massachusetts has used the place-based education model since 1999. Between 2002 and 2006, Beebe students have outpaced their peers in the school district on MCAS tests in math and science, suggesting a correlation between place based-education and academic performance.

During a teaching visit…I presented a lesson on soil science and erosion. I asked the group of students where erosion occurs. One bright student raised his hand and explained, 'it happens in the Badlands of South Dakota.' Much to my surprise, the students did not realize that erosion happens everywhere, including on the school campus. Using the tools of a scientist (our five senses) during a walk around the outdoor classroom, students quickly recognized several examples of erosion and become more excited to learn about soil properties…When learning becomes real and tangible, children are more interested and engaged in their own education.

— Educator,
REAL School Gardens

I wanted to prove forestry could be taught without sacrificing math. Now my kids believe you can't learn about the forest without math.

— Teacher,
Forest for Every Classroom program

INVITES STUDENTS TO BECOME ACTIVE CITIZENS

The expedition to Thompson Island challenges students to rethink what they know about themselves and the world in which they live. For many it is the start of a new journey, for all it remains a memory that can last a lifetime.

— Teacher,
Mildred Avenue Public Middle School,
Boston, Massachusetts

The Forest for Every Classroom program has built strong connections between schools and their communities, fostering opportunities for service-learning and stewardship. Participating teachers work with students on projects such as monitoring forest health, eradicating invasive plants, testing local water quality, mapping watersheds, and building and improving public trails. Through their involvement with these projects, students feel empowered to continue making positive contributions to their community

ENERGIZES TEACHERS

A second grade teacher at the Bernice A. Ray School in Hanover, New Hampshire, participated in a year-long professional development program to learn to use place-based education. Her project focused on integrating the 32-acre forest outside her classroom window into her classroom curriculum. She also gained confidence in her own leadership skills. Inspired and energized by her experience, she arranged for a summer workshop on place-based education for her fellow teachers. One result: The second-grade curriculum at the Ray School has been redesigned around using the local forest to teach science, math and even language arts. Students learn from the forest, and gain a deep understanding of and appreciation for their local landscape. The teacher described the extended impact of this place-based education experience: "[It] gave me the peers on a professional level outside my school to recharge and to update my knowledge and content. It was that link that gave me the push to get the science committee to commit to the outdoor-focused curriculum."

I've never worked so hard before in my life, but it has been so worth it. What these students are learning and doing is real. This is real education. I've always wanted to teach this way, but never took the time.

— Teacher,
Sustainability Academy at Lawrence Barnes,
Sustainable Schools Project

Because of CO-SEED I'll never again be the same teacher…It's transformed my whole vision about how I teach my kids. It gave me the tools, it gave me the vision, it gave me the opportunity. The results are just phenomenal. Between writing and reading, the kids are hooked, and I will never teach the same again.

— Teacher,
Gilford Elementary School,
New Hampshire,
CO-SEED

TRANSFORMS SCHOOL CULTURE

[Our daughter] feels like she's in a special place… There's a real sense of 'we have a mission, we have a purpose, we enjoy ourselves. And what we do really means something, not just to ourselves, but to the world around us.' There's huge pride [in the students] and in parents as well.

— Parent

The days of sitting in the classroom are done… When [the weather] gets nice, now teachers don't say 'Can I go outside?' They say to me 'I'm going outside.'

— Principal,
Dennis C. Haley Elementary,
Boston, Massachusetts,
CO-SEED

Three years of a formal place-based education program have helped to make the Dennis C. Haley Elementary School, a public school on a busy highway in Roslindale, Massachusetts, a different place. The schoolyard and a local nature center have become outdoor extensions of Haley's classrooms. Children grow gardens, explore a mini-wetland, categorize and analyze insects, track weather stations and write detailed reports on their findings. Students, said one Haley teacher, are "more motivated, asking better, more critical questions" and "see[ing] themselves as scientists, observers, and they see that as an important, important thing." Parent involvement at Haley has increased. Students and teachers report a new enthusiasm for teaching and learning science. Haley has gone from being under-enrolled to being a "top choice," model environmental school—with all available slots filled by students whose families indicated Haley as their top or second choice school in Boston. Collaboration among teachers has increased. New teachers embrace the place-based education ideals, because those ideas have become an integral part of the school's culture.

"I think the [place-based education] mentality is really part of our identity," said one Haley teacher. "It's who we are."

CONNECTS SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

The Sustainability Academy at Lawrence Barnes is the country's first sustainability-themed magnet school. Launched in 2009, the school is a partnership between Shelburne Farms and the Burlington School District. The Kindergarten through fifth-grade students, teachers, their families, and community partners are committed to shared learning to improve the quality of life for all—economically, socially, environmentally—now and for future generations. Students are working in collaboration with city officials, non-profits, and higher educational institutions to make the connection between human and environmental health and well-being. The students engage in service-learning projects that develop their skills as active citizens affecting change beyond their school walls. Recently they approached the school board after discovering that some school buildings were not handicap accessible and lobbied for equal access to education. Their voices were heard and the district installed ramps so that all children can access the building—through the front door. Students from this low-income, urban neighborhood have been referred to as "the future of city government."

This is democracy at work! You students brought your recommendations to your elected officials and they listened to you and responded. Congratulations! What's next?

— Mayor,
Burlington,Vermont

This is ideal 21st century education with integrated curriculum, global and local connections, and civic engagement.

— Parent
of Sustainable Schools Project participant

ENCOURAGES STUDENTS TO BECOME ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDS

I know our students are walking away from the seventh grade experience having a deep appreciation for their own environment and the intrinsic value of the public lands for all. They understand our responsibility to be stewards of our land, and not just users of it.

— Teacher,
Forest for Every Classroom program

[Place-based educaton] has complemented and supported our children's project to reduce erosion in our playground stream garden and to restore native riparian flora to what was an asphalt play surface next to a chain link fence.

— Teacher,
The College School,
Webster Groves, Missouri

A group of special-education students from Greenville, Maine has organized a field research team to study the 100-Mile Wilderness, a segment of the Appalachian Trail. These students are producing signage and brochures for trail users, and will be hiking the 100-Mile Wilderness in sections over the course of a year. They were inspired to become Appalachian Trail stewards after their teacher attended a *Trail to Every Classroom* Summer Institute, a week-long course intended to encourage teachers to use the trail as a resource both in and out of their classrooms.

Litzsinger Road Ecology Center, near St. Louis, Missouri, gives visiting teachers and students the opportunity to experience and study a rich variety of native habitats including bottomland forest, restored prairie, and an urban creek. Some participating schools take their field studies to another level. At New City School, students are encouraged to put their knowledge to work outside the classroom. A band of fourth- through sixth-graders has been putting that expertise and passion to work as "River Kids." The after-school group has conducted a detailed river conservation study, participated in stream clean-ups and re-vegetation projects, and continues to act as effective public advocates for river conservation.

What is PEEC?

The Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative (PEEC) is a group of organizations that work together to:

1. Improve their programs through individual and cross-program evaluation;
2. Identify, develop, and disseminate evaluation techniques, tools, and approaches that can be applied to other place-based education providers; and
3. Contribute to the research base underlying the field of place-based education and school change.

For more research information and copies of evaluation reports, see *www.PEECworks.org*.

For more program information, see *www.PromiseOfPlace.org*.

PEEC Partners:

Community-based School Environmental Education Project (CO-SEED) of Antioch New England Institute

A Forest for Every Classroom
(Shelburne Farms, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, Green Mountain National Forest, National Wildlife Federation, NPS Conservation Study Institute)

Litzsinger Road Ecology Center
(Missouri Botanical Garden)

Wellborn Ecology Fund
(New Hampshire Charitable Foundation)

REAL School Gardens

Sustainable Schools Project (Shelburne Farms)

Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center

A Trail to Every Classroom
(National Park Service, Appalachian Trail Conservancy)

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