SCHOOL OUT IN THE SUNSHINE: INNOVATIVE DISTRICTS ARE TURNING TO THE OUTDOORS FOR POWERFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

California Area, Highlands, and Shaler Area

The stewardship of land. The art of hydroponics. And an entire science curriculum taking place well past the exit doors of the school building. At three western Pennsylvania districts, school is definitely out — or, at least, happening outside.

Shaler Area, Highlands, and California Area school districts are leaning hard into what lies outside school walls, using innovative approaches that help students access hands-on learning, understand their communities and the natural world, and discover a wide range of potential careers.

In the process, these students are building their world — sometimes quite literally, as in the case of Shaler Area students who have saved several acres of green space through their efforts.

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THE OUTDOORS — A PLACE FOR LEARNING

Go outside. Get some fresh air. Encounter nature. And have fun doing it.

Those were mantras for many Americans who grew up in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. But in an era of networked video games and endless scrolling on smartphones, it's easy for that sensibility to get lost.

So the strategic pointing of students toward the outdoors — and for things other than gym classes or team sports — is increasingly on the minds of teachers and administrators.

At Highlands, a robust program and working space have both gained momentum, says assistant superintendent Cathleen Cubelic. From greenhouses to an aquaponics shed to an outdoor pavilion, the district has developed an entire infrastructure to support the notion that great learning can happen outside.

Now, middle-school students at Highlands are busy building raised beds for their classmates to do planting. The elementary school features hydroponic tower gardens where kids plant seeds and tend to their growth.

Two local farms have joined the effort as well: Blackberry Farms and Harvest Valley Farms send folks in to do instruction that's supported by Penn State (which began nearly two centuries ago as the Farmers' High School of Pennsylvania).

Kids don't just study and write about what they've grown; they eat it, too.

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Elementary students enjoy tastings from the plantings that they've done on campus, Cubelic says. And the hydroponic plants, once they're thriving, are taken to the high school greenhouse "so that all kids are having exposure to them," she says.

At California Area, which sits in a rural area that's home to an impressive population of animals, students have always been connected to the outdoors. But a trip to Finnish Education Week in Helsinki showed the superintendent, Laura Jacob, even more innovative possibilities.

The emerging result: "Outdoor Science School."

"It's completely off the grid," says Jacob, who grew up on a farm not far from California Area's campus. "It all happens outdoors. The kids have solar-powered backpacks and we have a yurt."

The program is now expanding to include biology classes as well — again, inspired by the success of Finnish schools. A curriculum built around foxes is being adapted, for California Area, into one built around goats (some of which actually live on campus).

Students who participate will, Jacob says, learn about the environment in the most hands-on of ways.

"That visit to Finland was so affirmative of where we're going and what school could look like," she says. California Area has also adopted a Finnish educational principle of "45 and 15," which prescribes spending 15 minutes

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outside for every 45 minutes in the classroom.

"They've got the best educational system and the happiest people," Jacob points out, "so they must be doing something right."

IMPACT FAR AND WIDE

At Shaler Area High School, teachers learned of a "giant green space" for sale in their community. A real estate developer was interested in building on the land, which would have reduced the green space — and reduced the absorption of stormwater.

The Allegheny Land Trust was working to protect the land and the Shaler Area students, already learning environmental science in a sustainability course taught through the University of Pittsburgh, wanted to help raise funds toward the effort. The outcome for this land mattered to the district, which includes the flood-prone boroughs of Etna and Millvale. So Shaler Area kids jumped in to raise funds and awareness.

They turned Nilson's classroom into a miniature forest with little trees that the students grew. Anyone could "buy" a tree and it would be planted in the woods. Soon, they raised $8,000. And over the past several years, with $32,000 more raised and two more parcels of land protected, they've saved more than 300 acres of green space. The Shaler Area teens even teamed up with their longtime football rivals at nearby North Hills School District on this environmental project.

"Typically," Shaler Area senior Kaysia Chelli told KDKA-TV, "we are rivals. But we're really next-door neighbors, and everything we do affects each other. So it's really good to work together."

These efforts at Shaler Area continue. Some recent graduates who took the class are now majoring in environmental science at college — and, says Nilson, their high-school experiences around the green spaces are "something they still talk about."

The Shaler Area students aren't alone: At California Area, the impact of learning outdoors and working with plants and animals has opened up a world of possibility for students of all ages. Students are connecting with the land and seeing the connection to the many farms — and environment-related jobs — in their community.

At Highlands, too, community impact is emerging as a major motivation. Food insecurity is a significant issue in the district, and there's not a great deal of agricultural knowledge, says Cubelic.

"So the scarcity issue," she says, "really creates an opportunity for us to build programming that creates a level of awareness for our students."

And once they've learned about things like hydroponics in elementary and middle school, these learners reach high school ready to explore environmental and agricultural career opportunities.

These three school districts are breaking new ground — in some cases, literally — and are sharing their discoveries with others as members of Future-Driven Schools, a regional alliance of school districts working to prepare every learner for tomorrow. Together, these districts help teachers, administrators, and board members do what they do best: innovate and collaborate in ways that benefit their students and communities.

Each of these districts is putting their own spin on outdoor learning. But in the process, Shaler Area, Highlands, and California Area are proving that getting your hands dirty and growing things can be a doorway to deep learning and powerful career opportunities. And the simple step of going outside can be one of the most empowering choices of all.

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