

Innovative Project Links Classrooms, Urban Youth to Nature

The Challenge

Urban populations in Michigan are increasingly disconnected from the natural world around them. Meanwhile, school teachers often lack the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to help engage urban youth with the outdoors and tie them to nature. Little funding or time is available within school systems to provide these supports.

The Solution

An innovative project in Michigan helped to engage teachers as forest stewards and tie their training back to the classroom. The “Building Community Capacity to Manage Private/Public Forests and Develop Forest Stewards” project received a (\$81,509) grant spread over 2011–2014 from the Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry. The funding helped coordinators to develop a Forest Stewardship education program for inner-city Detroit teachers and to assist them in integrating their natural resources (including the nearby Belle Isle Nature Zoo) into their curriculum and areas of awareness. Michigan Tech along with nearly a dozen partners participated in the initiative.

Resulting Benefits

Project coordinators developed three daylong teacher workshops and a weeklong teacher institute. The project also provided funding for classroom supplies and student bus trips. Sixty teachers from 30 schools went through the program and engaged their students in field trips, work days, and developing natural areas at their schools. The teachers earned graduate credits from Michigan Tech for their participation in the program.

After completing the curriculum, students indicated the experience was often their first outing in the woods. Their teachers also mentioned a demonstrated increase in participating student attention during and after their activities in the forests and natural areas. The funding stipulated a 1:1 match in either funding or obligated time from partners, helping to stretch available resources.



Despite the wintry weather, two Detroit Public School teachers practice taking tree measurements during a teacher workshop. (Photo: Joan Chadde Schumaker, Michigan Technological University)

Sharing Success

Participants completed Forest Stewardship projects and shared their experiences with families and school communities. The many connections developed during the initiative will possibly be sustained, as the project was linked to the Forest Service Urban Connections Program and the Belle Isle Nature Zoo staff. It is also being presented at a variety of education conferences in Michigan and was just accepted to a national conference as well.

Federal Award: 11-DG-11420004-234

Program helps inner city teachers integrate natural resources into curriculum.



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