

No Child Left Inside: Why an Integrated Approach to Environmental Education is Critical to Student Success

by Stephanie Ives, ECCC PTA Environmental Education Chair

Experiencing nature firsthand has always been an intrinsic part of childhood. Whether observing tadpoles transforming into frogs, watching an army of ants working together to relocate a moveable feast or witnessing the instant when a caterpillar becomes a chrysalis, the opportunities for authentic environmental education are limitless in the outdoor classroom setting. But it is exactly these real-life experiences that our "wired generation" children are more likely to miss as they become more connected and co-dependent on technology, and as their "devices" increasingly hijack both study time and downtime. Environmental education --or "EE" - makes learning real to children in ways that smart-boards, e-books and video screens simply cannot.

Biology and physical science remain abstract concepts to children until they have had the chance to observe and participate in nature up close. Recently I was thrilled to learn that my son's class spent a good portion of the day outside doing their assignments because their classroom smart-board wasn't working. By visiting natural environments, such as a school pond habitat, students can see firsthand the various elements of an ecological system working together in context while concurrently observing, investigating, and experimenting.

In his best selling book *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv coined the term "nature deficit disorder" to describe the negative effects of the digital age on our children. Louv asserts that direct exposure to nature is absolutely essential for healthy childhood development, and for the physical and emotional health of both children and adults. Exposure to nature may also help kids with (and without) attention disorders focus better in school. A recent University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign study showed that children with ADHD who spent more time outdoors enjoyed significant reduction in symptoms. Rather than depriving students of recess time for disciplinary purposes we should perhaps be increasing the time they are able to engage in the outdoor classroom whether through free play or directed instruction.

A defining goal of environmental education is to prepare students to make well-informed decisions in regard to the environment. Successful integration of EE programs in the classroom provides a well-rounded mode of education -- developing emotional intelligence and creative capacity in addition to cultivating intellectual ability. We are fortunate in East Cobb to have educators at all levels who value EE. Sponsored by the Cobb County Water System, the Cobb Green Schools Initiative recognizes those schools and individual teachers who are committed to incorporating EE into their classrooms on a regular basis. The ECCC PTA member schools who have been granted Green status for the 2014-2015 academic year include Addison, Bells Ferry, Blackwell, Davis, Keheley, Mt Bethel, Murdock, Rocky Mount, and Tritt Elementary Schools, Hightower Trail Middle School and Lassiter High School.

Opportunities for EE are facilitated in a variety of modalities whether by individual educators in outdoor classroom spaces on our school campuses, or by taking local field trips. For

field trips or family visits, the Wright Environmental Education Center, Sibley Pond, and the Chattahoochee Nature Center are all fantastic resources within the immediate vicinity .Participating in outreach programs through the Cobb Watershed Stewardship Program, Keep Cobb Beautiful, and the Clean Air Campaign also brings EE right to our students. Outdoor classroom amenities on school campuses can include amphitheatres, pond habitats, compost bins, learning gardens, bat houses, green houses, pollinator gardens, and woodland hiking trails. Schools can also implement campus-wide EE awareness programs such as waste-free lunch days, participating in the Keep America Beautiful Recycle Bowl competition, hosting electronics recycling events as fundraisers, establishing idle free carpool zones, and holding walk-to-school days.

How do schools actually start EE programs and build outdoor classrooms? Many school garden projects, outdoor classroom space, picnic tables, garden bridges and pond habitats have been funded by local PTA's and built by Boy Scouts pursuing their Eagle Awards. Keep Cobb Beautiful awards "Dig'n the dirt" school garden grants annually. Project Learning Garden is a Captain Planet Foundation program which helps establish new school gardens, assists with summer garden maintenance and provides a multi-grade garden curriculum linking to all disciplines from language arts, social studies, to science and math. The Cobb Schools Foundation and Whole Kids Foundation have grants that can directly fund EE programs. The EE Alliance also maintains a database of grant opportunities with application information and rolling submission deadlines at the www.eeingeorgia.org website.

If you are interested in getting involved with environmental education in our schools contact your school's PTA President or email: enviroed@eccepta.org. *As lead designer and co-owner of Custom Dwellings, Inc, Stephanie Ives and her husband Russell work to design, renovate, and build residences that are appropriate to our region's climate and environment. Residents of East Cobb since 1999, the Ives (no possessive apostrophe) have three children: Robert, a 4th grader, Rebekah, a 2nd grader, both at Addison Elementary School, and 2-year-old Elizabeth. They regularly enjoy hiking and camping as a family.*