

Linking with community to reclaim natural areas for education:

The McLane Elementary School Project

Students, teachers and the community work to reclaim neglected wetlands and forested areas for use as an environmental study site for interdisciplinary learning.

by Melinda Spencer and Kathy Kurtz Smith

The briny smell of low tide and the soft spring day are memorable stage dressings for the William Cannon Footpath dedication ceremony. But at center stage are students, staff, and neighbors of McLane Elementary School in Olympia, Washington, who visit and laugh as they check out the hundreds of daffodils and newly planted trees lining the trail as it meanders along Eld Inlet near Olympia. Their stewardship of the trail, named for the first non-Native

American to see this part of Puget Sound in 1824, stems from the hard work they've invested as part of the McLane School Forest and Trails Committee.

The William Cannon Footpath is the latest of several projects that McLane School and the community have collaborated on to reclaim neglected wetlands and forests near the school so they can be used as environmental study sites. This collaboration highlights a growing trend in environmental education in which schools work with the larger community to identify and accomplish goals they hold in common.

In the early 1990s, when volunteers met to explore ways to connect neighbors around the school, a long-term vision for the community was born. This vision included creating ways to help

students and the community interact with nature. The McLane School Forest and Trails Committee has been working with students and teachers since 1994, providing resources and labor to plant trees and bulbs, remove invasive species, and build and maintain trails.

This committee is an intergenerational team of parents, neighbors, and volunteers from Olympia School District, Capitol Land Trust, The Evergreen State College, state agencies, Boy Scouts, businesses, and environmental education organizations. Chief among the committee's volunteers is Washington's former Secretary of State Ralph Munro, who knows just who to contact to help get a job done. "When Ralph calls about a project," Doug McDonald of the Department of Transportation laughs, "I know children are involved, the environment is involved, and there is already an action plan." Ralph makes it easy to say "Yes!" He defines what needs to be done and helps everyone see what they can do to help.

Annual Tree and Bulb Planting

The committee sponsors annual tree and bulb planting sessions. The Department of Transportation has provided trees each year since 1995 so every student can plant a tree near the wetland and in the community forest near the school.

Nick Schmidt, a high school senior, was part of McLane's first tree planting group when he was in 5th grade. He says that the feeling of doing something as a school for the larger community was an experience he'll never forget. "Planting seedlings and seeing how big they are now has given me a sense of ownership in something wonderful and beautiful," adding that, "I will remember this project and have pride in it for the rest of my life."

Since 1995, students and volunteers have planted nearly 8,000 trees on or near the school. They have reforested over 40 acres of former farmland adjacent to the school and planted thousands of native shrubs and trees on the Evergreen Parkway overpass near the school. The forest is now used as a living learning laboratory.

Trails throughout the community forest are lined with bulbs planted by kindergarten and first grade students. As the bulbs bloom each spring, students see the impact of their work. This hands-on experience supports learning objectives in science and social studies.

Librarian Judy Porter, who has supported the school's environmental education efforts from the beginning, looks forward to the 8th annual planting session later this spring. She says the best thing about the school's reclamation projects is that "Students develop a very personal commitment to changing the environment." She adds that "Through these activities, students learn what it takes to make their world a little better. What they learn and do as students at McLane will grow with them throughout their lives."

Bringing the Curriculum Alive

Building on the success of tree and bulb planting, teachers began looking for other ways to use the environment to enhance student learning. In 1998, the Washington Forest Protection Association (WFPA), through its environmental education program, joined the committee. Kathryn Kurtz Smith and Susan



Duncan of the WFPA have worked with teachers, parents, other environmental education groups, and the committee to identify how natural features near the school can enhance learning.

Carla Roray's 2nd grade class designed a butterfly garden to coincide with the class's study of insects. The students identified plants appropriate for the Pacific Northwest's indigenous populations of butterflies. The teacher and a parent volunteer won a grant to build the butterfly garden. With the help of 15 volunteers, the students planted the garden that students can see and visit outside their classrooms.

Nancy Hamilton's 3rd graders focus on salmon and stream restoration, which are intricately tied to reforestation. Students create ceramic salmon after studying fish anatomy, tour a hatchery, and visit a creek in the community forest where salmon spawn.

You can see photos of Melinda McKown's kindergarten students doing the Project Learning Tree activity "The Shape of Things" on the Web at <http://www.wfpa.org>". Click on Environmental Study Site to view gardens, trails, wetlands, and other features that enhance outdoor study.

A Hillside for Wildlife and Education

This year, McLane plans to restore a hillside adjacent to the school, creating habitat for wildlife using native plants, building raised beds for class planting projects, and creating pathways and an outdoor seating area. Students will plan the garden and select, propagate, plant, and maintain the plants. Teachers from all grades are expected to use the area to integrate outdoor learning with the science, reading, writing, art, social science, and math curricula.

McLane school was awarded two grants, including a GreenWorks! grant, to develop the study site with the help of a landscape designer. Teacher Melinda McKown became eligible for this grant through her participation in a Project Learning Tree Environmental Education Workshop. To apply, go to <http://www.plt.org>.

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Visitors enjoying the William Cannon Footpath on Eld Inlet near Olympia, WA. The footpath was built through the efforts of the McLane School Forest and Trails Committee.



Ralph Munro leads McLane School students to Eld Inlet to haul one last load of garbage from the Sound at the William Cannon Footpath dedication ceremony.