FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A 379 Acre Classroom
Riveredge Nature Center Receives Grant In Partnership with NOSD To Plan And Launch First Nature-Based Public Charter School In Southeastern Wisconsin

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Who says a classroom has to be limited by four walls? Thanks to the awarding of a $700,000 charter school planning and implementation grant in late June by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Riveredge Nature Center is in the initial stages of launching the first nature-based public charter school in Southeastern Wisconsin, the Riveredge Outdoor Learning Elementary School (ROLES). Authorized by the Northern Ozaukee School District, ROLES will ultimately allow 99 K-5 students each year the opportunity to use Riveredge’s 379 acre restored natural sanctuary as an outdoor learning laboratory and to reap the health, wellness, and academic benefits a growing body of research shows comes with nature-based learning.

“For 50 years now, one of Riveredge’s primary missions has been to partner with our local schools to make the outdoors and environmental education an integral part of their students’ learning. As we celebrate 50 incredible years in 2018, we couldn’t think of a more fitting expansion of this mission than opening a school right here at Riveredge, and we’re so excited to be able to do it with one of those great partners, the Northern Ozaukee School District”, notes Jessica Jens, Riveredge’s Executive Director.

The Department of Public Instruction’s grant will allow for a year of planning and development of the new school with funding for a lead teacher, support services, equipment purchases and classroom furniture. ROLES is expected to open for the 2019-2020 school year with 67 K-4 students, expanding to fifth grade the next year, and ultimately reaching a maximum capacity of 99 K-5 students in 2021-2022. As a public charter school authorized by the Northern Ozaukee School District, ROLES will be open to students located in any school district at no cost. Students who do not reside in the school district will be able to open enroll, and a lottery system will be utilized if the number of applicants exceeds capacity. Once operational, ROLES will become an independent organization led by a Governance Council and Lead Teacher that will be financially self-sustaining without need for fundraising.
“We are very excited to partner with Riveredge and the future opening of ROLES. There are so many great things happening at Riveredge and in the Northern Ozaukee School District, so this partnership aligned with our focus on being a destination school district. We have a tremendous opportunity to work together and expand the educational experience for students across our district in a way that is rigorous, innovative, and engaging”, stated Dave Karrels, Northern Ozaukee School District Superintendent.

Riveredge aims for ROLES to serve as a laboratory for outdoor learning which amplifies the outcomes of public education, serves learners of all abilities and needs, fosters a deep connection to the environment, and prepares students for success in school and life. Ultimately, the school’s curriculum will be centered around the three pillars- nature-based, inquiry-based, and community-based learning- that form the core for so many of Riveredge’s other educational partnerships.

These efforts include the thousands of K-12 students who visit Riveredge each year for hands-on field trips, an innovative Scientist in Residence program placing an environmental educator and resource partner for teachers and students directly in both the West Bend and Cedarburg School Districts, and a nature-based 4K partnership with the West Bend School District and Kettle Moraine YMCA. The opening of ROLES is not intended to replace any of these other efforts, but instead to enhance them, with the school and its staff serving as a leading professional development resource for educators looking to incorporate the outdoors into their own schools and districts.

“Every day, we see the incredible and inspiring impact that taking learning outside can have on kids. Whether it’s the teacher who shares that a student who normally struggles with attention issues in the classroom was in rapt awe while searching for pond life on a field trip, or the 4K parent who told us her daughter went from being slightly wary of the natural world at the beginning of the year to delicately picking up a spider and moving it outside for safety by the end of it, we see the benefits of environmental education in action. Our biggest hope for ROLES is that it will expand opportunities for this type of learning not only here at Riveredge, but throughout the state and region,” Sunny Knutson, Riveredge’s Director of Education, explained.

Community members interested in learning more about ROLES can visit www.riveredgenaturecenter.org for initial information. As a Lead Teacher is hired and the planning year begins, significant updates will become available through the fall and winter with a full website, information sessions, and the first year’s enrollment window expected in early 2019.
About Riveredge Nature Center
Celebrating their 50th Anniversary in 2018, Riveredge Nature Center has been a pioneer in engaging people with the natural world. Its 379 acres of restored wild Wisconsin ecosystems, 10 miles of trails for adventuring, and a legacy of hundreds of thousands of kids, adults, and families transformed by a deeply intimate interaction with nature are a testament to Riveredge's passion for this cause. That passion continues today through the building of a movement to partner with local schools, communities, and organizations to bring the natural world into everyone’s daily lives.

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