

# IDEAS FOR SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS



Formal partnerships between local nature centers and school districts are an opportunity to deepen learning and life skill outcomes. Partnerships that expand beyond field trips allow for deeper relationships between a local nature and their communities. Riveredge Nature Center (RNC) and the Cedarburg School District (CSD) have completed two years of such a partnership. We hope that the information presented in this short 'Idea Sheet' will help other nature centers and environmental organizations consider perusing deeper relationships with their school districts which may positively affect not only the students, but the entire community.

## RNC-CSD PARTNERSHIP COMPONENTS

- Participation of each elementary student, teacher, and class in all three Cedarburg elementary schools;
- Annual guaranteed outdoor environmental education learning experience at RNC for all students;
- Professional development opportunities available to all K-5 teachers led by RNC education staff;
- A RNC staff member designated to work with the teachers and students at each school throughout the year to support the use of local outdoor spaces for instructional purposes;
- Science equipment for each school that teachers and students use in their outdoor classrooms to augment an inquiry-based approach to science learning;
- On-site outreach programs led by RNC staff at each school; and
- Support of each school principal and the Director of Curriculum and Instruction.

## PARTNERSHIP OBJECTIVES:

1. Students will meet the learning outcomes identified by the district/teachers.
2. Students will show increased knowledge about, appreciation of, and relationship to the natural environment.
3. Students will indicate importance of and connection to their community (human and natural).
4. Students and their families will increase their connection to the natural world through increased time outside or increased sustainable practices at home.
5. Teachers will increase their utilization of natural outdoor spaces across grade levels and subject areas.
6. Cedarburg School District administration will model environmentally sound practices.
7. Riveredge Nature Center will increase meaningful connections with students, teachers, and their families through deepened relationships because of the partnership.
8. Cedarburg community will demonstrate a raised awareness and understanding of important community environmental issues and show increased evidence of environmental stewardship.



## IDEAS FOR THE START OF YOUR SCHOOL – NATURE CENTER PARTNERSHIP

1. Develop a meaningful and authentic relationship with teachers and administrators at the school district.
2. Identify resources available in your nature center/environmental organization to staff and implement the partnership. What gaps exist? What additional resources can be secured? What resources is the school district willing to contribute?
3. In collaboration with interested teachers and school administrators, determine how a partnership could meet the goals of both organizations. Define objectives for the potential partnership.
4. Consider professional development for teachers and equipment/supplies needed to encourage outdoor learning at the schools.
5. Develop a comprehensive evaluation plan for the partnership. How will you know you are meeting your objectives? How can you identify medium and long term outcomes as the partnership continues? What is the baseline data?
6. Communicate and then communicate more. Determine a system to regularly contribute to teacher and administration communication lines so that awareness of the partnership is high.
7. Provide a means for regular feedback for program improvement.

## EVALUATING YOUR PARTNERSHIP

As noted above, evaluation should be a key consideration at the start of your partnership. The evaluation project which RNC and CSD completed in the second year of our partnership has allowed us to create a baseline of student and teacher opinions. We are looking forward to comparing annual evaluation results with previous responses as the years of the partnership increase.

For our evaluation project, we heavily utilized the “LEAF/Goodman Armstrong Creek Community Partnership Project: Year Two Participant Evaluation Report” by C. Kelly of University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point (2011) as a model for our evaluation instruments.

## ABOUT RIVEREDGE NATURE CENTER

Over 45 years after the Whitefish Bay Garden Club purchased the few acres along the Milwaukee River near Newburg that would become one of the very first nature centers in southeastern Wisconsin, children still need a place to discover the natural world. Since then, more than 250,000 Riveredge Kids have experienced what it is to see a frog for the first time, hear an owl in the dark of the forest, stop in wonder at the spring ephemerals, and squeal with joy at all the wonderful water creatures in the Milwaukee River. From the beginning, the Riveredge ‘experiment’ has been about engaging people with the natural world – and doing so in a way that is personally transformational and cultivates a meaningful connection to nature.

Riveredge is more than a nature center. Its legacy of innovation, partnerships, and leadership in the areas of land restoration, research, and inquiry-based education throughout Wisconsin serve as strong foundation to its future initiatives. Today, Riveredge is pioneering methods of redefining a community’s relationship to a nature center. Riveredge is achieving its mission by empowering and supporting communities to live in harmony with their natural environment...oh, and having fun in it too.

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