

The Benefits of **Place-based Education:**

A REPORT FROM THE
PLACE-BASED EDUCATION
EVALUATION COLLABORATIVE

It reminds us that learning is way more than words on a page. It's water moving around our boots. It's mud and cold. It's all these sensory dimensions in the real world we're part of. If it's rivers kids are learning about, then standing in one and turning over stones to find stoneflies teaches in new ways that connect them. They gain new respect for the river. They have opportunities to see themselves as a part of something that has a long history and a long future. They become more hopeful. Through the experience they learn to become stewards.

—Michael Quinn,
Seventh and eighth grade science teacher,
Hartford Middle School,
White River Junction, Vermont



Place-based education

immerses students in local heritage, culture, landscapes, opportunities, and experiences as a foundation for the study of language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, and other subjects.

Place-based education encourages teachers and students to use the schoolyard, community, public lands, and other special places as resources, turning communities into classrooms.

Project-focused and inherently tailored by local people to local realities, place-based education is equally relevant in small towns and big cities, equally effective for kindergarteners and high school students.

The Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative is undertaking a rigorous and ongoing evaluation process to gauge the effectiveness and outcomes of the place-based education model. Since forming in 2001, the Collaborative has instituted individual and cross-program evaluations of **six place-based education programs** representing nearly **100 schools** (rural, suburban, and urban) covering twelve states; The body of evidence reflects over **800 adult interviews** or focus group participants; over **200 student interviews**; over **750 educator surveys**; over **2,000 student surveys**; extensive document review; and dozens of on-site observations.

The findings are clear: place-based education fosters students' connection to place and creates vibrant partnerships between schools and communities. It boosts student achievement and improves environmental, social, and economic vitality.

In short, place-based education helps students learn to take care of the world by understanding where they live and taking action in their own backyards and communities.





Place-based education:

ENERGIZES TEACHERS

A second-grade teacher at the Bernice A. Ray School in Hanover, New Hampshire, participated in a year-long professional development program to learn to use place-based education. Her project focused on integrating the 32-acre forest outside her classroom window into her classroom curriculum. She also gained confidence in her own leadership skills. Inspired and energized by her experience, she arranged for a summer workshop on place-based education for her fellow teachers. One result: The second-grade curriculum at the Ray School has been redesigned around using the local forest to teach science, math and even language arts. Students learn from the forest, and gain a deep understanding of and appreciation for their local landscape. The teacher described the extended impact of this place-based education experience: “[It] gave me the peers on a professional level outside my school to recharge and to update my knowledge and content. It was that link that gave me the push to get the science committee to commit to the outdoor-focused curriculum.”

I've never worked so hard before in my life, but it has been so worth it. What these students are learning and doing is real. This is real education. I've always wanted to teach this way, but never took the time.

—Teacher,
Sustainable Schools Project

Because of CO-SEED I'll never again be the same teacher. And I say that because it's an absolutely life-confirming positive search. It's transformed my whole vision about how I teach my kids. It gave me the tools, it gave me the vision, it gave me the opportunity. The results are just phenomenal.

Between writing and reading, the kids are hooked, and I will never teach the same again.

—Teacher,
Gilford Elementary School,
New Hampshire,
CO-SEED

TRANSFORMS SCHOOL CULTURE

[Our daughter] feels like she's in a special place... There's a real sense of 'we have a mission, we have a purpose, we enjoy ourselves. And what we do really means something, not just to ourselves, but to the world around us.' There's huge pride [in the students] and in parents as well.

—Second grade parent

The days of sitting in the classroom are done... When [the weather] gets nice, now teachers don't say 'Can I go outside?' They say to me 'I'm going outside.'

—Principal,
Dennis C. Haley Elementary,
Boston, Massachusetts,
CO-SEED

Three years of a formal place-based education program have helped to make the Dennis C. Haley Elementary School, a public school on a busy highway in Roslindale, Massachusetts, a different place. The schoolyard and a local nature center have become outdoor extensions of Haley's classrooms. Children grow gardens, explore a mini-wetland, categorize and analyze insects, track weather stations and write detailed reports on their findings. Students, said one Haley teacher, are “more motivated, asking better, more critical questions” and “see[ing] themselves as scientists, observers, and they see that as an important, important thing.” Parent involvement at Haley has increased. Students and teachers report a new enthusiasm for teaching and learning science. Haley has gone from being under-enrolled to being a “top choice,” model environmental school—with all available slots filled by students whose families indicated Haley as their top or second choice school in Boston. Collaboration among teachers has increased. New teachers embrace the place-based education ideals, because those ideas have become an integral part of the school's culture.

“I think the [place-based education] mentality is really part of our identity,” said one Haley teacher. “It's who we are.”



HELPS STUDENTS LEARN

Ten studies from across the United States connect place-based education with academic achievement. (See www.PEECworks.org for a complete breakdown.)

One study compared first graders who had one and two years of work with a teacher who employed a strong, place-based education model. First-graders with more exposure to strong place-based education out-performed their peers on all measures analyzed. Educators at sites using place-based education models consistently report that their students have become increasingly engaged and enthusiastic about learning. “My kids were so excited about the things that they saw that I know they will look more and pay closer attention to our environment,” said a teacher who participated in a place-based education program in Missouri. “Actually visiting the ecosystems helped them really understand the concepts that I was trying to get across.”

The Beebe School in Malden, Massachusetts, is an Environmental and Health Science magnet school which uses local resources to integrate those sciences into the curriculum. Beebe has used the place-based education model since 1999.

Since 2000, Beebe students have outpaced their peers in the school district on MCAS tests in math and science, suggesting a correlation between place based-education and academic performance.

One thing we know is that kids’ writing is much more interesting, complex, and detailed if they’ve had rich experience... The current first grade has about a third of the kids who didn’t have Kindergarten here and in general it is breathtaking the difference in the academic achievement. Our Kindergarten has the strongest place-based education in the school, especially with language development.

— Principal,
Young Achievers School,
Boston, Massachusetts,
CO-SEED

I wanted to prove forestry could be taught without sacrificing math. Now my kids believe you can't learn about the forest without math.

— Teacher,
Forest for Every Classroom program

CONNECTS SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES

This is democracy at work! You students brought your recommendations to your elected officials and they listened to you and responded. Congratulations! What’s next?

— Mayor,
Burlington, Vermont

Lawrence Barnes Elementary School students went into their urban Burlington, Vermont neighborhood and made a detailed assessment of it. They noticed that the neighborhood lacked “school zone” safety signs alerting drivers to the school on this busy thoroughfare. So the fourth and fifth graders went to see the city’s Director of Public Works. They were told the process would take a long time. The students pressed, asking why the process could not be sped up for such an important safety issue. The process was expedited and the signs were installed with the mayor on-hand to congratulate the young activists. The students also presented their larger findings to the City Council and Neighborhood Action Committee. Students from this low-income, urban neighborhood have been referred to as “the future of city government.”



Recent research finds that place-based education:

ENCOURAGES STUDENTS TO BECOME ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDS

A group of special-education students from Greenville, Maine has organized a field research team to study the 100-Mile Wilderness, a segment of the Appalachian Trail. These students are producing signage and brochures for trail users, and will be hiking the 100-Mile Wilderness in sections over the course of a year. They were inspired to become AT stewards after their teacher attended a Trail to Every Classroom Summer Institute, a week-long course intended to encourage teachers to use the AT as a resource both in and out of their classrooms.

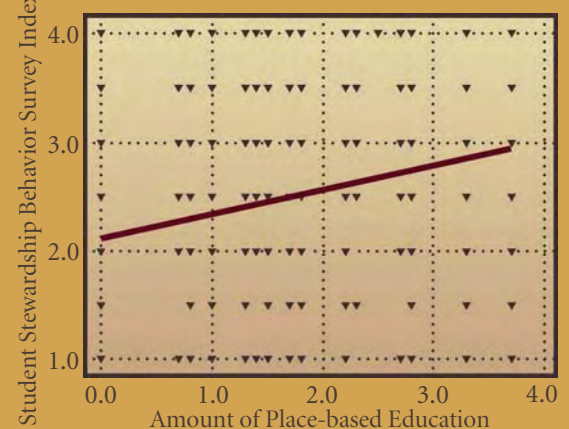
At the New City School in St. Louis, Missouri, field studies are part of the curriculum, and students are encouraged to put their knowledge to work outside the classroom. A band of fourth-through-sixth graders has been putting that knowledge and passion to work as “River Kids.” The after-school group has conducted a detailed river conservation study, participated in stream clean-ups and re-vegetation projects, and continues to act as effective public advocates for river conservation.

I know our students are walking away from the seventh grade experience having a deep appreciation for their own environment and the intrinsic value of the public lands for all. They understand our responsibility to be stewards of our land, and not just users of it.

— Teacher,
Forest for Every Classroom program

Increased Stewardship Behavior

(from PEEC surveys, $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $p < .01$, $df = 1409$)



INVITES STUDENTS TO BECOME ACTIVE CITIZENS

Going into high school a lot of kids always say 'I want to get out of here. I want to go to the big city.'

But after studying your town and finding out about people, buildings, and the community and how it actually is, I think it's a good place to be.

— Eleventh grade student,
Community Mapping Project

The Forest for Every Classroom program has built strong connections between schools and their communities, fostering opportunities for service-learning and stewardship. Teachers from the program work with their students to map the locations of vernal pools, collaborate with their local conservation commissions on inventories of natural sites, and conduct studies of invasive species in the White River in Vermont. Students are now actively involved in training others to carry on that work.

What is PEEC?

The Place-based Education Evaluation Collaborative (PEEC) is a group of five programs and one foundation that work together to:

1. Improve their programs through individual and cross-program evaluation;
2. Identify, develop, and disseminate evaluation techniques, tools, and approaches that can be applied to other place-based education providers; and
3. Contribute to the research base underlying the field of place-based education and school change.

For more research information and copies of evaluation reports, see www.PEECworks.org.

For more program information, see www.PromiseOfPlace.org.

PEEC Partners:

Community-based School Environmental Education Project (CO-SEED) of Antioch New England Institute

A Forest for Every Classroom (Shelburne Farms, Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park, Green Mountain National Forest, National Wildlife Federation, NPS Conservation Study Institute)

Litzsinger Road Ecology Center (Missouri Botanical Garden)

Sustainable Schools Project (Shelburne Farms)

A Trail to Every Classroom (National Park Service, Appalachian Trail Conservancy)

New Hampshire Charitable Foundation

