

## What is Place-Based Education?

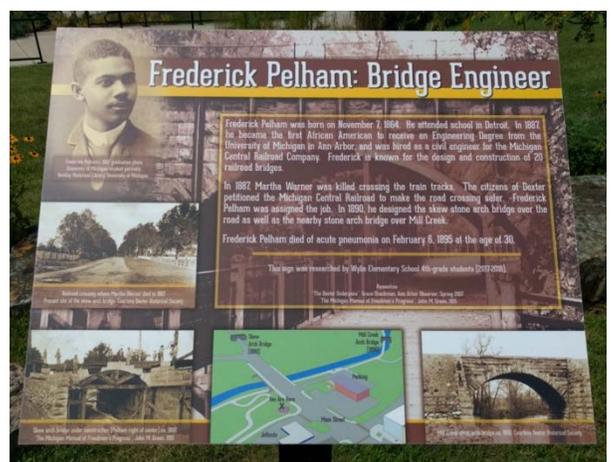
You may have heard the term “place-based education” in presentations by DCS administration, weekly principal communications, or in conversation with your student’s teacher. But what exactly does it mean, and how does it relate to Dexter Schools? Place-based education (PBE) is becoming more prevalent in our classrooms, and you may be surprised to discover your child has already participated in a PBE project; projects that not only educate students across disciplines, but benefit the surrounding community as well.

*From the Southeastern Michigan Stewardship Coalition (SEMIS) website: “Place-based education integrates student learning into the community, solving real problems while aligning projects with standards across the curriculum. Most importantly, it engages students by answering the question lurking in the back of their minds: “How does any of the stuff I’m learning in class relate to the real world?”*

PBE immerses students in local heritage, cultures, landscapes, opportunities and experiences, using these as a foundation for the study of language arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum. PBE emphasizes learning through participation in service projects for the local school and/or community.

### Place-Based Education at Wylie Elementary

At Wylie Elementary, students have been participating in PBE projects for several years. In 2017, fourth-grade teachers Deb Eber and Laura Ambruster and instructional coach Jeff Dagg created a PBE unit centered around the stone arch railroad bridge northwest of downtown Dexter. Their classes took a field trip of Dexter’s bridges to learn about the principles of bridge design, researched bridge engineer Frederick Pelham, and successfully petitioned the Dexter City Council to post a sign recognizing Pelham’s contribution to the community. The project combined science, engineering, history and civic engagement lessons, and involved every competency in the DCS Learner Profile.



This project is just one of the many place-based education units being taught at Wylie and around the District. “At Wylie, our focus is specific instructional practices and place-based education integration,” says Wylie principal Katie See. Wylie is the home of an experimental combined third- and fourth-grade PBE class, taught by Deb Eber; this classroom is the follow-up to the March 2020 two-week SPARK trial class.

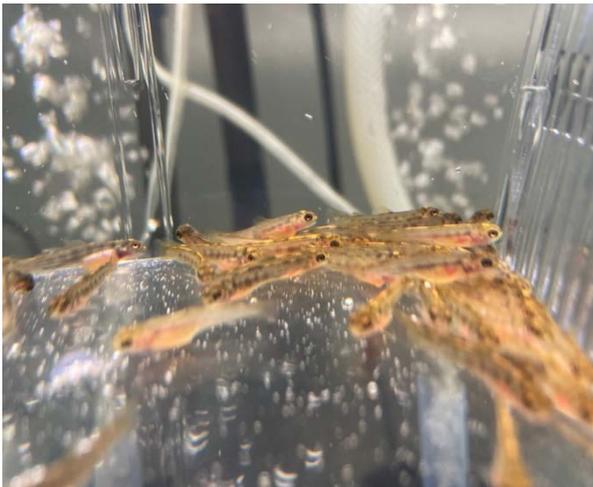
“Teachers see so much value in place-based education,” See adds. Dexter Schools is on the leading edge of PBE practices, partnering with the Southeast Michigan Stewardship Coalition (SEMIS) for teacher professional development in this style of education. Seven Wylie teachers are currently in training with SEMIS, which includes eight days of professional development throughout the year. The District’s partnership with SEMIS connects Dexter Schools with other partner schools and community organizations throughout southeast Michigan. This networking leads to new ideas and projects, with support from SEMIS to facilitate connections and provide coaching for teachers.

### **Wylie Teachers Share Their PBE Classroom Experiences**



Wylie fourth-grade teachers Natalie Hanlon and Jim Barnes, and third-grade teachers Betsy Schmidt and Leah Tatara are among those working with SEMIS to bring place-based focus into their classrooms. Natalie Hanlon has integrated PBE into a unit focusing on student identity: how students see themselves in their place and how others can play a part in that identity. Reading books incorporating different identity characteristics (race, religion, ability, socioeconomic status, etc.), students discussed how we all have different internal and external characteristics and how these can create connections between people. The class talked about activism, what character traits activists might have, and how activists can impact their local community. This was the concept behind the Wylie #4CommuniTREE project in 2020, a compassion campaign using the Google My Maps tool, which tracked ribbons tied to trees to show unity throughout the Dexter community and elsewhere during the pandemic.

While studying prominent activists, the class brainstormed real-world problems (i.e. pollution) and discussed possible solutions. They learned about Melati and Isabel Wijsen of Bali, who saw plastic pollution as a problem in their country and started a movement to remove plastic bags from their environment. Their grassroots efforts evolved into a 25-person organization called Bye-Bye Plastic Bags, and resulted in the entire island of Bali being declared plastic bag-free in 2019. Hanlon’s class was inspired to realize that no matter your age, anyone can be passionate about a problem they see, spread awareness and try to fix it. Moving forward, students plan to focus on their activist efforts at Wylie or in the wider Dexter community.



Jim Barnes’s classroom has partnered with Trout Unlimited to help stock Mill Creek with brown trout each year. Barnes’s students raise brown trout in the classroom for release each year, creating a direct impact on our local community. During nice weather, the class walks to Mill Creek each Wednesday to engage in activities such as water testing (in partnership with Huron River Watershed Council), sound and physical mapping, and mindfulness activities, all intended to give students a sense of place with their surroundings. Students learn about the life cycle of trout, which is a non-native species to Michigan, and why the state releases a non-native species into our streams, diving into the economic and social impact of this practice.

Barnes has also partnered with Ducks Unlimited, whose national mapping work is headquartered in Dexter, to create an ARCGIS digital mapping tool. Students contribute research, artwork and stories inspired by the creek to the map. The end goal is to work with the City of Dexter to put signs along the creek portion of the B2B trail containing QR codes which, when scanned, bring up the ARCGIS map with the students' contributions.



Co-teachers Betsy Schmidt and Leah Tatara are using the Caldecott-honor book *"Paddle-to-the-Sea"* as a resource to teach their third-graders the history of Michigan. The story features a young Native American boy who carves a canoe with a figure inside he names Paddle-to-the-Sea, who journeys through the Great Lakes to the Atlantic Ocean. Schmidt and Tatara have launched two place-based projects tied to our local area to further student understanding of the book.



This past November, the two classes took the first of two field trips to Mill Creek to measure the current along the Border-to-Border Trail. Using a stick thrown into the water, students measured how long it took the stick to travel a 350 ft. stretch of water before the rapids near Mill Creek Park, then a 475 ft. stretch through the rapids. From these measurements, the classes made the claim that currents are stronger and faster over the rapids. Taking another reading in January, students learned an important lesson: outcomes do not always happen as expected. One of the sticks became lodged under ice, and the other got stuck in a whirlpool current.

The second project uses the book to discuss the importance of beavers to Michigan. The classes read [The Sun Times News article](#) from April 2021 about beaver activity near the creek. Walking the creek, they clearly saw the dam and possible lodge near Forest Lawn Cemetery. Students used these observations to launch an investigation about dams, the importance of beavers to ecosystems, and the Fur Trade. Schmidt and Tatara plan to integrate an opinion writing component into this investigation. Their intention is for students to learn enough about beavers in human habitats to write persuasive speeches to the Dexter City Council about what should be done about the beavers in Mill Creek Park.



### **Continuing to Expand Place-Based Learning at DCS**

DCS Executive Director of Strategic Initiatives Mollie Sharrar fully supports the District partnership with SEMIS and the integration of place-based education into the curriculum. "Through our work with SEMIS," Sharrar says, "teachers are able to provide place-based and authentic experiences that allow our students the agency and empowerment to work collaboratively in our community."

*This is the first in a series of articles featuring the many ways DCS practices Place-Based Education. Look for future articles on how other Dexter buildings are incorporating real-world, community-based learning into the curriculum.*