

## Wallingford kindergartners have fun, learn in the woods

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WALLINGFORD — The air is crisp, leaves are crunching under your feet, and you can hear kindergarteners running through the woods screaming in delight.

Those kindergartens are students from Moses Y. Beach Elementary School and they make a trip to Choate's Kohler Environmental Center once a month for three hours of hands-on learning in the woods.

"They're so completely, 100 percent engaged and crazy and active and discovering," Kindergarten teacher and co-founder of the program, Adrienne Ferretti said.



The program, named Kinderwoods, started as a pilot program funded by the Wallingford Education Foundation last year with only one class.

The program had such a great response from adults and kids alike that this year all six classes get to take a trip to the woods nine times a year.

Ferretti and Anne Porier, media specialist at Moses Y. Beach, started the program when they realized kids weren't spending a lot of time outdoors anymore and some had never really been to the woods.

"We just wanted to open that door for them and show them what fun it could be just to be outside and play," Ferretti said.

The kids get to visit the woods Oct. through May— rain or shine— and each time they have a different focus.

This past week, the students learned about earthworms and temperature, so they dug around for worms and used thermometers to take the temperature of different things in the environment. The week before they learned about different shapes found in nature and built some of their own.

Each trip to the woods starts with a song or poem, launches into a brief focus lesson and then the kids have free time to explore and play.

"That's kind of where the most exciting and the most magical learning happens, is where they wonder about something and they try to figure it out," Ferretti said of the free time.

Students get to play and have fun, but she said they are also learning through everything they do. Their periodic trips to the woods meet the school's math and science standards, both through the lessons and free time.

“You could say, ‘oh look, they’re just playing in the water,’ but they’re seeing what floats and what sinks, and what balances- and those are all things in our science curriculum,” Ferretti said.

Ferretti and Porier also make an effort to observe what the students are interested in and create lesson plans around what the students are curious about.

“(When the students) found earthworms, they had a lot of questions about them, so we took them back to school and we did a unit of study on earthworms. And then it was fun because the next time we came back, when they found more earthworms they were able to say ‘oh, there’s the egg sack that they had learned about in the book,’” Ferretti said.

Lena Nicolai, a staff member at the Kohler Environmental Center, said that connection between what they find in the woods and learn in the classroom is key.

“It’s the novel experience that then leads them to ask what it is, why it is, how it is,” and the learning continues when they go back to school, Nicolai said.

Because students are returning to the same area of the woods each visit, students end up paying attention to seasonal changes and they develop a sense of belonging in the space.

“They remember the things that happen here. That’s sometimes powerful for them,” Nicolai said. “I know that the children who participated last year... ask if they can come back again.”

The Moses Y. Beach PTO funds the program now and helps pay for transportation to the Kohler Environmental Center, as well as supplies like magnifying glasses and binders for each student.

The PTO also ran a clothing drive last year to collect snow pants, gloves and hats to keep in the classroom in case a child doesn’t come with their own change of clothes— a necessity since they love to play in the stream and get completely muddy.

Ferretti said the kids really surprise them sometimes. Kids that they wouldn’t expect to want to get muddy will splash around in the stream and love it.

“You see a whole different side of them. They’re just free to be themselves,” Ferretti said.

She said even watching the students take safe risks and try to balance on logs or solve things themselves is exciting.

“(There’s) so many benefits to just playing outside in nature. Their gross motor, their fine motor, how they cooperate with each other- just their problem-solving.”

As Ferretti and Porier were first developing the program they looked for suitable sites to bring the students and found Choate’s Kohler Environmental Center (KEC) to be perfect.

“(Choate has) been so generous, they’ve shared the building with us, they’ve shared their expertise with us,” Ferretti said. “Once we figured out that this was a potential connection, we were just so grateful and so happy to be able to work with Choate.”

