

A Vision for Place-Based Learning

In an ideal world, education would be linked to where we live. Educators would be tapped into local parks, industry, culture, and museums. They would know where the local streams, forests, and fields are, and have the appropriate contacts, resources, and support to bring those experiences into the school day. In so doing, learning would be immersed in the community, both the built and the natural. By the time students graduate, they would feel a deep connection to the place that enriched their lives and laid the groundwork for a future of inspired citizenship, deeply rooted stewardship values, and in more ways than can be explained with words, a strong connection to home. Place-based learning is what we want for Suffield students, and we are building the platform to make it happen.

Learning rooted in place, or place-based learning, is in its second year at Suffield Public Schools. During our first year, we laid the groundwork. We found early adopter teachers and analyzed the curriculum for natural connections. We began looking at our facilities, leading us to partner with the town to bring the outdoor classroom at Spaulding Elementary School back to life. We started classroom initiatives, including visiting the wastewater treatment plant. With the help of the Suffield Foundation for Excellent Schools (SFES), we bought trail cams and scent station materials for the first grade 'habitat' unit. We invited Sustainable Suffield in as part of our kindergarten 'taking care of our earth' unit and explored composting. We visited other districts to explore place-based programs and learn about best practices. These districts report increased engagement and scores. We started a committee to work together to make place-based learning a reality, because if you want to go far, you go together. Last but not least, we hosted our second annual Ecology Explorers experience and invited 600 2nd, 5th, 7th, and 10th graders out to explore the forest and learn about nature at the Suffield Land Conservancy's McClean Outdoor Education Preserve.

So where are we now? Well, it's the beginning of a new school year and we have exciting experiences planned. We partnered with Antioch University, a national leader in place-based education, to provide professional learning to our teachers on how place-based learning can happen in their classrooms. We're focusing on elementary 'specials' courses (music, physical education, art, STEM, etc.) for natural ties to Suffield, and since a student's sense of place expands as they age, we're tailoring these experiences to the appropriate developmental stages. As time goes on, we'll expand our field of focus to other courses and continue to build. And, we are just about to host our third Ecology Explorers program.

To me, this is the way education should be - deeply rooted in the forests, fields, businesses, and community that make this place home. It should be hands-on and minds-on, happening both on screens and off, inside buildings and out in the world. It's where students are working on projects and solving problems that arise from looking deeply at their community. School shouldn't be separate from the world around us - it should be woven into the fabric of our town. When we do that well, the lines between school, community, and the natural world that are so often compartmentalized throughout a child's education begin to fade. So, community, consider this your invitation. Let's build it together! For more information, contact me at jkaput@suffield.org. I'd love to hear your ideas.