

## A fresh perspective on education

Lima Elementary students head outside for structured lessons, unstructured play

**JUSTIN MURPHY**

@CITIZENMURPHY

“OK, let’s go explore!”

The kindergartners at Lima Elementary School didn’t need to hear that instruction twice. They hopped down the tree stump trail leading to their outdoor classroom, squishing in the mud with rubber boots and waving magnifying glasses at anything standing still.

Some bounded up a short dirt hill and took in the view. A half dozen jockeyed for position on a tree snag where its bulbous base jutted out. Five-year-old Luke Boldt led an expedition into a six-inch trickle of water.

“I really liked going in the water,” he said. “And guess what else?”

What?

“I went in the forest.”

It was a typical day for kindergarten teacher Barbara Rose and the 300 kindergarten and first-grade students at the school. They visit their growing outdoor

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Quinn Brooks peers through binoculars from up high as Max Mayo, left, and Oren Davis flank him in a tree in the outdoor classroom at Lima Elementary School. There is increasing interest in outdoor education and free-range learning in general.

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### Outside

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classroom every day, in beautiful fall weather like last week but also in the snow, wind and rain.

"We just say there's no bad weather," Rose said.

It is the most vibrant local example of an increasing interest across the country in outdoor education and free-range learning in general. Educators are increasingly seeing the value in having children outdoors for both structured lessons and unstructured play.

"Play is an area where children are experts," local psychologist Bruce Gilberg said. He is the founder of Generation Two, a program that pairs young children in Rochester and Fairport with adult volunteers for unstructured play. "Developmentally, it's a way for adults to move to the child's level to understand what's on their minds. And the beauty of play is there are no dire consequences. It's experimental — if the results don't turn out all that well, there's always a second or third chance."

Sometimes, Rose and other teachers at the school use the outdoor space no differently than their classroom: students bring out a clipboard and do their regular assignments.

Other times, the typical curriculum is modified for the outdoors. For instance, children use sticks to practice writing letters and numbers in the snow, or add and subtract snowballs and compare their sizes. And some days, there's no lesson at all. Just the suggestion: "Let's go explore!"

"The mindset (at school) is so strict; the day is just blocks of time to do this and do this and do this," Rose said. "There's so much value in just free, unstructured play." The outdoor space was built and shaped mostly by volunteers with donated materials. There is also a garden on the other side of the school building, and the vegetables students pull from it get used in the cafeteria.

The school recently got a grant to partner with Wild Wings, the bird-of-prey sanctuary in Mendon Ponds Park, to develop students into "ambassadors of wildlife." Part of the benefit of being outdoors, Rose said, is the natural concern students develop for the creatures they come across. After it rains, they want to go outside and rescue the beached earthworms.

"We're developing stewards for the future," she said. "They can't love something they don't know."

The Lima Elementary School program began four years ago and is the most prominent local example of a school sending its students outside to learn. Many other schools, however, incorporate nature in smaller doses.

Brighton, Penfield, West Irondequoit and World of Inquiry School in Rochester are among the places where students in a certain grade go each year on an overnight outdoors trip. West Irondequoit also has the affiliated Helmer Nature Center, a 45-acre outdoor classroom utilized by its own students as well as many from other local districts.

In Brighton, the new sixth-graders at Twelve Corners Middle School spend two days at Rochester Rotary Sunshine Campus in Rush. It's part scientific expedition, part orientation. "It's nice to get away from school because it gets kids in a different environment," Twelve Corners Principal Rob Thomas said. "You can learn more about a kid from an hour of play than a month of school." Rose said she has fielded calls from other local schools asking about her program and how they could implement something similar. There are obstacles, though: school districts have whittled their offerings through years of budget constraints imposed by the state, meaning less money is available to pay for the teacher training and curriculum development required, to say nothing of possible construction costs.

"The way school budgets have been, this is probably not the best of times for districts to expand programs," said Charles Yapple, executive director of the Coalition for Education in the Outdoors at SUNY Cortland. "I'd be doubtful about how quickly it's spreading."

He added, however, that college-level outdoor education has been growing more quickly, and that K-12 programs are much more robust in other states, like Michigan and Texas.

At the same time, stricter academic requirements have made it more difficult to carve time out for lessons that don't connect directly

to state standards.

“There are two movements that conflict with each other,” Gilberg said. “One is a more authoritarian approach in adopting core standards and emphasizing expectations and highly structured learning; on the other hand, there are many people paying attention to how play and creative, child-centered learning enhances the intrinsic motivation to learn.”

Rose acknowledges it takes extra effort to incorporate the outdoor classroom into her indoor work. She recalled a day when the children lay on their backs in the grass and looked at the clouds. She encouraged them to go home and do the same with her parents.

One mother called her later that evening and said her son had pestered her relentlessly to go look at the clouds until finally she paused in her endless to-do list to go outside for five minutes. They ended up lying in the grass for 40 minutes.

“I have a schedule that I get caught up in, too — it’s tough,” Rose said. “But she said it was the best part of her day. And she said they’re going to do it again.”

[JMURPHY7@Gannett](mailto:JMURPHY7@Gannett)

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