



HILLSIDE ELEMENTARY: More than a walk in the woods

Robin Farrell is the STEAM teacher at Hillside Elementary School, a K-4 public school in Hastings-on-Hudson, NY. In 2018, she spent several months working with CELf to revive the nature walk program at her school for all grade levels. She has transformed a program that previously suffered from irregularity and a lack of true connection to classroom curriculum into a vibrant outdoor learning experience. Now the school is planning an outdoor classroom to expand learning beyond school walls. This is her first person account of that transformation.

At Hillside, we have had our nature walk program for decades, but over the years, our nature walk program has been a little uneven. Some grades were going out more, some less, and by third grade, the children were unable to go out at all. When I took on the role of STEAM teacher, part of the role was to revitalize our nature walk program, and to give every student the opportunity to get outside multiple times a year.

The first year was really just - let's give every single child the chance to get out into our Hillside Woods twice a year. That alone was a huge feat in terms of scheduling, changes in attitudes, and getting teachers to see the value in bringing their classes outside. During this phase, it was awesome watching the kids move beyond just the excitement of being out of the classroom, and into an appreciation of nature and



making some great noticings, and observations and asking questions.

A community member helped me reach out to individuals in Westchester County that have a variety of expertise in this area, and CELf was one of them. So I was able to connect with Vicky {Garufi, Director of Education}, and really start talking about where I needed help. Even

though I am familiar with the standards, I'm not very familiar with nature. I needed help in finding hands-on learning experiences that could bring these standards to life and get the kids engaged with them.

Last summer I had the opportunity to take part in CELf's Summer Institute. I didn't know what to expect. I hadn't really had experience with the Big Ideas of Sustainability. I didn't understand how sustainability affects our life as a teacher and with our children. Some of the biggest takeaways for me were around the idea of social justice - that it's more than just recycling. There are changes over time, there are equality issues. So it changed the angle from which I was approaching the idea of sustainability in





the classroom.

Along the same lines, just making connections between other elementary schools, and other institutions of education and learning was helpful. For example, Westmoreland Sanctuary - I made some great connections there because we were approaching the Institute from two opposite yet complimentary angles. They had all this experience teaching and learning in nature, whereas I had the experience of classroom teaching and familiarity with the new standards that were coming down. So together, with CELF support, we were able to really brainstorm and look at things from new and creative ways.



I was also able to participate in a breakout session led by a Staten Island teacher who led us through the hands-on activities their children did in learning about the health of bodies of water next to their school. We are so lucky at Hillside, as we have our own Sugar Pond and a vernal pond. I gathered ideas for grant writing opportunities, working with CELF to write these grants, and then opportunities to do similar programs up here that really match. These are things I wouldn't have even thought of if I hadn't taken part in the Summer Institute.

So with [CELF] support, multiple phone conversations, meetings together, support in writing grants, and support in getting these messages of sustainability out there, we



have been able to create the beginning of a wonderful program. For example, my second grade students are learning about properties of solids as part of the physical science disciplinary core idea. During our nature walk, our learners are involved in a texture scavenger hunt. This specifically addresses NGSS 2-PS1-1 Matter and Its Interactions, which states that students must plan and conduct an investigation to describe and classify different kinds of materials by their observable properties. We do amazing hands-on projects inside. It's a totally different experience to see them out in the woods taking off their



gloves. Sitting on the moss, feeling the squishiness of it. Putting their hands in the dirt, noticing when the leaf litter is there and when it's not. Noticing how the logs are in different states of decomposition along the way.

Our fourth graders spend time learning about the physical structures of living things and how these structures allow them to survive. One of the living science disciplinary core ideas for fourth grade is 4-LS1-1 From Molecules to Organisms: Structures and Processes that says students will construct an argument that plants and animals have internal and external structures that function to support survival, growth, behavior, and reproduction. While out on our nature walk, students are engaged in a game that clearly shows invasive species taking over. As we continue our walk, we are able to identify some of these invasive species as well as discuss the steps local community groups are taking to bring back our native species. Those are things they are seeing in their own woods that I can't show them inside.

My own experience is changing too. I wouldn't consider myself a very comfortable person in nature. But now I look forward to starting my days outside in the fresh air, and seeing the changes in Hillside Woods over time. I'm becoming more aware of my





surroundings. I'm able to hear the birds differently. We were doing sound mapping with my first graders, and it was really wonderful across the span of three minutes. Within that first minute, we didn't hear much sound. In the second minute, we hear other birds come in, and by the end of the third minute, we were hearing some of the more predatory birds, hearing some of the hawks come out. That to me raised so many questions, just in those three minutes. Being able to



bring my kids outside and to find things in nature, they're starting to identify things. They're starting to ask questions, moving beyond "Everything is poisonous!" to "What is the purpose of that? Does that belong here?" So I see way less fear and uncertainty with nature, and way more excitement, wanting to see changes out there.

Now that we had the opportunity to work with CELF, to go to the Summer Institute, and think more deeply, and reflect upon the changes in our teaching, I feel we have a lot of places to grow for next steps. One place would be talking with our District, and thinking about the District's vision and their support behind moving forward in a larger sustainability initiative. I was inspired at CELF's Summer Institute by a keynote speaker from Warwick Valley who spoke about

the ways his District became a Green Ribbon Award winner, and thinking about how here in Hastings we are already doing so many of these things. But how can we name it, how can we put it under a larger umbrella.

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ROBIN FARRELL,
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SCHOOL



This past summer, Robin returned to the CELF Summer Institute as a presenter to share her experiences, her lesson plans, and her advice with a new set of teachers. We are looking forward to following the evolution of the Hillside Elementary School Outdoor Classroom, and how Robin continues to develop the nature walk program. Stay tuned!