



Sustainable Schoolyards: Sowing the Love for Our Natural World

By Andi Cooper, WRD Environmental

WATCH caterpillars mysteriously transform to a chrysalis then butterflies, FEEL the silkiness of a seed pod brush against your cheek, or SMELL the pungent aroma of dill crushed between your fingers. It is moments like these that powerfully shape one's views of the world. These rich experiences illustrate how manipulating the natural world touches our senses, creating lasting memories and connections to our environment.



Unfortunately, nature's allure is lost when our children spend countless hours mesmerized by screens – stuck indoors. A recent Nature Conservancy survey reports that only about 10 percent of today's youth spend time outdoors each day, and kids ages 8 to 18 spend a devastating 53 hours a week using entertainment media.

Why? Their reasons are a lack of access to natural areas, and general discomfort.

So what can we do to help create more acces-



sible spaces for youth to head outdoors, while outfitting them with ways to stay comfortable?

When you take a close look, local schools and communities have demonstrated how they can allure our children back outside - connecting them with nature. In Lombard, Illinois Hammerschmidt Elementary School, in partnership with the Lombard Park District, the Village of Lombard, the DuPage Community Foundation, DuPage FORWARD and DuPage County, is creating the WHS Learn+Play Gardens. This green schoolyard aims to inspire students and community members to go outdoors, connect to nature and get active – hence “leave no child inside.”

The WHS Learn+Play Gardens provides teachers with tools to extend curriculum beyond the school walls and into the landscape. The Edible Garden was built by students and adult volunteers in 2013. Since it was built, each spring over 400 students grow plants from seed, and use cold frames so vegetables like lettuce and radishes are ready to harvest by the end of the school year. Over the summer, Garden Club members take turns weekly tending the garden and enjoying its bounty. Additionally, landscape material is composted onsite, and reused within the garden, and wildlife has returned to the area that was just previously turfgrass.

Additional zones to the Learn+Play Gardens will be constructed over the next year. The Nature Based Playground will provide a safe unique spot where kids can manipulate their play world, be creative and connect with nature. Highlights include a teepee, outdoor musical instruments, stepping logs, and rock outcroppings, all nestled into a field of native plants. The Butterfly Garden will attract pollinators

and provide hands-on viewing about the life cycle. Various best management practices (BMPs) will aim to infiltrate water back into the ground – rather than sending it to the already full storm sewer.

Enhanced amenities like shade from trees and pergolas, bike racks, and various seating options will make the experience more comfortable for kids, teachers and caretakers alike. A new drinking fountain will feature a water bottle refill station, thus limiting waste and encouraging kids to stay hydrated.

As a landscape architect and a parent of three young boys, I am passionate about balancing kids' innate love of technology with conservation and the outdoors. I'm supported by my employer, WRD Environmental, whose mission is to help our clients like Hammerschmidt Elementary create sustainable, healthy environments. WRD is helping three Chicago high schools convert nearby vacant properties into outdoor science labs. It also helped Western Avenue Elementary School, in Geneva, Illinois, create an Edible Schoolyard.

Spending time outdoors at a young age is critical

to foster a healthy conservation ethic. We know that being outdoors contributes to a decrease in depression, and an increase in physical activity. Nature has the power to help us reduce obesity and diabetes while increasing general wellness. In fact – some doctors prescribe nature therapy (time outside) to their patients.

Aside from personal health benefits, exposing kids to nature is vital to get them to care about environmental issues. People with positive outdoor experiences during childhood are more likely to be interested about environmental issues as they grow into adults.

For these reasons the future well-being of our planet is dependent upon our 21st-century youth heading outdoors building this relationship now. Community leaders, designers, educators and advocates have the opportunity to create and steward places that build this relationship. The best places may just be school grounds – meet the kids where they spend a majority of their time and make it educational, comfortable and fun.

