

Cumming Nature Center inspires forest schools across the country

04 May 2020

ROCHESTER — After stay-at-home restrictions began, the staff at the Rochester Museum & Science Center Cumming Nature Center adapted their Forest School curriculum to engage students with the natural world remotely.

Since then, other forest schools across the country have reached out to the Center for advice on how they can adapt their own curriculum to an online format.

“Forest School is different from most traditional schooling in that we are asking children to go outside and make discoveries; To wonder and to investigate,” said Angela Cannon-Crothers, Environmental Education Coordinator at the Center. “We often ask them how they might find answers to their questions rather than answer questions for them, and we try to help them come up with their own questions about the natural world.”

Online Forest School has created a platform for year-long Cumming Nature Center Forest School students to connect with teachers and classmates and retain some of the regular routines. It also provides the opportunity to invite more families to explore the Forest School educational model.

For those who were not already enrolled in Forest School, the Center is now offering weekly two-hour Online Forest School sessions for elementary-aged students. Although the majority of Online Forest School students are from New York, students from Pennsylvania to Missouri have also enrolled since creating the online offerings.

Expanding the reach of environmental education is an obvious next step during the stay-at-home order, but converting a curriculum from in-person to online learning can create some difficulties. After seeing the success of the CNC Online Forest Schools, several institutions reached out to the CNC for advice, including: Fiddleheads Forest School (Washington state); Sky Valley Education Center (Washington state); Nature Connect (Alabama and North Carolina); Old Trail School (Ohio); and Fern and Feather Preschool (Massachusetts).

“To learn about the work that the Cumming Nature Center has been doing to maintain their connection with their children and to promote connection with nature has helped us find new ways to adapt our nature-based program to an online format,” said Ryan Ofsthun, Director at Fern & Feather Preschool in Massachusetts.

For Nathan Hayes, director of the CNC, sharing the Nature Center’s advice about moving from in-person to remote, online learning can only benefit institutions that promote robust environmental education. By expanding Forest Schools to a wider, online audience, Nature Centers everywhere can support families at home and get kids learning outside.

“Instead of exploring the landscape at the Cumming Nature Center, we’re engaging families where they are and inviting them to explore the magic of their local landscape. Going online has allowed us to maintain our existing Forest School community, and even expand it to include learners who may not have been able to participate in the past,” said Hayes.

In addition to engaging students with nature at home, Cannon-Crothers points out that Online Forest School also offers a refreshing challenge for Forest School instructors and a source of comfort for the students.

“Creating the online format has required all the instructors to be innovative and creative in new ways. I have loved the challenge of it, and I love seeing the kids; We all do,” said Cannon-Crothers. “The kids seem so happy to see us too, especially our regular year-long Forest Schoolers. We are part of their lives and it’s important to connect meaningfully with them during this stressful and changing time.”

For more information about the CNC Online Forest School, visit rmsc.org.

Source: https://www.fltimes.com/briefs/school_zone/cumming-nature-center-inspires-forest-schools-across-the-country/article_ca6edbad-b87d-528a-92c6-018a42431c2e.html