

## The forest for the trees

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HANKINS, NY — School districts throughout the country are grappling with a conundrum right now. How do they provide an education amid a pandemic? How can they maximize the quality of the learning experience without threatening the health of students, teachers, staff and members of the community?

While doing an interview on this subject, a local radio host recently jokingly presented a solution, “I say, outdoor classrooms in Sullivan County and Northeast PA... That’ll teach people resilience.”

Some local educators have suggested this exact idea, only they’re not kidding.

The concept that children can learn both life skills and fundamentals like math and science while sitting on a tree stump in the woods—rather than at a desk in a classroom—is actually quite widespread, and it long predates the coronavirus. Advocates for this educational philosophy—known as the “forest school” or “nature pedagogy”—span the globe, from European countries, to Australia, to right here in Sullivan County.

In a typical forest school program, you might find students sitting around a campfire, whittling sticks, climbing trees, hiking, making creations out of natural materials, playing games where they pretend to be animals or writing out messages in the dirt. The adult in the group is most likely not restricting the kids to any rigid schedule. To an uninformed observer, it might just look like a loosely planned out playtime in the woods. But its practitioners say that students are learning important lessons the entire time.

According to the Forest School Association, this outdoor learning ethos originated from Scandinavia, whose culture has been shaped by the concept of *friluftsliv*, literally translating to “open-air life.” In the U.S., the first school of this kind was established in the late 1960s, and the first national conference of its practitioners was held in 2002.

Locally, Caroline Baillie and Eric Feinblatt direct a forest school program called Standing People Together in Hankins, NY. Baillie, who also trains teachers in this style through the

University of San Diego, said one of the primary components of a forest school education is risk management.

"A lot of the forest school training is about helping kids understand and manage risk, so they're not thrown into the world without any preparation," she said. "Unlike the kind of plastic, hermetically sealed playgrounds which teach them they can fall from six feet without getting hurt, forest school environment helps them understand that they can [get hurt]... they actually learn how to deal with danger before it happens."

Baillie said that forest school children typically are also given more freedom than traditional students, with games and lessons that emphasize independence, resilience, creativity and connection with nature. According to Baillie, these ideals can also be merged with the standard curriculums that most public schools require.

"The kids are learning almost without even realizing they're learning," Baillie said, describing how children who might struggle to learn basic arithmetic in a classroom setting because they can't pay attention or feel anxious might benefit by turning it into a game in the woods, running from tree to tree, collecting stones and sticks, and learning to count what they find. Research into nature-based learning has found that it can reduce symptoms of ADHD and hyperactivity while also improving children's mental health in other ways.

In addition to running their own program in Hankins, Baillie and Feinblatt have spent the past several years promoting and facilitating forest school opportunities throughout the community. They've worked with Sullivan West School District to develop an outdoor classroom on its own campus in 2018. More recently, they've helped in an ongoing Sullivan County Land Bank project to develop four lots called Bailey Commons in Monticello. Children from the Sullivan County Center for Workforce Development Summer Youth Employment Program spent the summer turning Bailey Commons into a location for afterschool outdoor learning and community recreation.

"Most of the lots are unbuildable so we thought a community use of these lots would improve the neighborhood and provide public access for outdoor passive activity for residents to enjoy," said Sullivan County Land Bank Executive Director Jill Weyer.

There will be a ribbon-cutting ceremony at Bailey Commons on Thursday, August 21 at 11:30 a.m.

"The pandemic certainly slowed down the project but luckily since it's outside and social distancing is possible, we were able to start a smaller phased approach program. The youth focus on cleaning up all the debris on the property and the village road right of ways, and then clearing and laying out the trail and outdoor classroom," Weyer said. "We were lucky enough to obtain funding from both the Laura Jane Musser Foundation and Sullivan Renaissance to keep the project moving and develop it in phases."

With forest school learning slowly gaining a foothold in Sullivan County the past several years, Baillie and Feinblatt felt that further implementing outdoor learning could be a solution to the specific challenges facing local educators in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. They recently penned a letter to all the public superintendents, principals and state representatives making this case.

"Look, now's the time, as you're thinking about opening schools, to get it together and develop more outdoor classrooms; that is going to be the safest thing for the students," Feinblatt said. To their frustration, however, they did not get a response. Feinblatt called it "disappointing" and "a failure of imagination."

Baillie and Feinblatt have had to get imaginative in running their own program this past spring. Embracing the requirements of social distancing, Standing People Together ran a virtual forest school this year, which connected children in the U.S. and the U.K. Children were still encouraged to go outside and complete activities—building a den in nature,

forming three-dimensional shapes using sticks, creating art from mud—and afterward they would meet via Zoom for show-and-tell.

As Baillie and Feinblatt continue to run their own program, while also helping to develop similar projects throughout the community, their broader goal is to make forest schooling available to a wider demographic of children.

“It’s largely contained within pre-school or Kindergarten—often private school,” Baillie said. “Our particular emphasis is trying to bring it into the public schools, which I’ve seen happen in the U.K. to enormous benefits of the kids.”

While getting school students out into the open air may seem especially pertinent in a time when shared air is inherently risky, Feinblatt sees forest schooling as a long-term opportunity to improve the education system as a whole.

“All of a sudden, it’s kind of bubbling up as a solution to a very specific problem we’re having right now,” he said. “In fact... it may help us to reimagine what education could look like.”

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