

green schoolyards

FOR HEALTHY
COMMUNITIES



CASE STUDY: Learning Landscapes, California

MISSION:

To conserve riparian, meadow, and forest lands adjacent to every school in the Upper Feather River Watershed, while supporting teachers to independently use these “Learning Landscapes” effectively and sustainably.

GOALS:

The goal of Learning Landscapes is, **“No matter where they eventually settle, children from the Feather River region will have learned how to get to know a place, to love a place, and to take care of a place.”** Related goals are to nurture children’s healthy development and care for the Earth, engage community members, and support the professional development of the community’s teachers so they can confidently and effectively work with their students in outdoor classroom settings.



OVERVIEW

Learning Landscapes offers an inspiring and replicable model of collaboration between a local land trust, landowners, a school system, and community members. Founded in 2004 as an educational program serving school-aged children in the Plumas Unified School District of northern California, the idea was created by Rob Wade, an educator with a strong land ethic who was serving both as a teacher in the area and a member of the board of directors of the Feather River Land Trust. The program is an initiative of the Feather River Land Trust, made possible by a strong collaboration with the Plumas Unified School District and the District’s commitment to the concept. The program’s success is a combination of authentic, hands-on learning that serves the learners’ healthy development cognitively, socially, and physically while connecting the students in meaningful ways with the natural

world in their surrounding environment. In addition to serving the children, youth and families in their region, Rob and his colleagues have created a toolkit and resources for others to create similar programs in their communities. While the Plumas Unified School District remains the core educational collaborator, the program idea has spread. Learning Landscapes serves the Upper Feather River Watershed, which is comprised of 18 schools (K-6, 7-8, 9-12 in each community), in six communities in three different districts (Plumas Unified, Westwood Unified, Plumas-Sierra Joint Unified) and three counties (Plumas, Lassen, Sierra), serving nearly 3000 school children annually.

THE WORK

One of the first steps in getting the program launched was to survey the teachers in the Feather River region, starting with those within the Plumas Unified School District in northern California. It quickly became apparent that the teachers tended not to take their students outside for learning experiences because there were not outdoor spaces easily available, and many, if not most, of the teachers lacked the experience and confidence to do so. Two major things were needed: nearby outdoor places and spaces for learning, and support for the teachers’ professional development. Both have been achieved. The professional development is a continuing process, with the aim of increasing the amount of time all students are engaged effectively in learning in their outdoors classrooms.

FUNDING

Primary funding has been made possible through the work of the Feather River Land Trust; the donations of land, materials and services from local landowners; the in-kind donations of volunteers; and the in-kind support of Plumas Unified School District and other cooperating school districts, their administrators and teachers. The Trust made a conscious decision to think “in perpetuity,” consistent with the values of land trusts, to build a resilient and sustainable system of outdoor classrooms designed to optimize learning and an ethic of care for the land. With the outdoor classrooms all within a ten minute walk of the schools, no funding is needed for transportation. In one year alone, students went on more than 600 field trips to their nearby outdoor classrooms, just by walking there with their teachers.



WHO IS SERVED

“The kids, but our primary audience is the teachers because they are the gatekeepers,” says Rob Wade, founder and coordinator, Learning Landscape. “That is my most important work—to serve the teachers, to know where they are, their fears and needs. Ultimately, I have so many audiences that make this work possible. It is a rich ecosystem of partnerships, including the landowners and the educators, all with a shared mission for children to love the land and know how to be on the land.”

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

There are many. Among the most notable is the dramatic success demonstrated by there now being an outdoor classroom within a ten minute-walk of every school in the region. Local landowners have contributed conservation easements to help make this possible. The commitment to teachers’ professional development has resulted in an increase in the percentage of elementary teachers using the outdoor classrooms from 20% initially to 100% today. Similarly, 100% of the middle and high school science teachers are using the outdoor classrooms with additional use by other subject area specialists. Notably, there is an associated increase in the quality of teacher instruction and student learning.



See www.learninglandscapes-frlt.org for additional information.

LESSONS LEARNED

Based on the lessons learned over the years since the program’s founding, Learning Landscapes uses the following strategies to bring about the greatest support possible for teachers and the deepest impact for children. These, as stated on the program’s website, are:

- > **Proximity** - Placing an outdoor classroom on every campus and an adjacent property within 10 minutes of every school creates the opportunity for a field trip on any day of the year.
- > **Frequency** - The convenience of proximity encourages repeated use by teachers and increases environmental self-efficacy among those students who are regularly in contact with the natural world.
- > **Infrastructure** - Developing a campus or off-campus site is based on specific teacher input and seeks to improve safety, identity (signage), access (entry & trails), comfort (seating), and learning (interpretive signage).
- > **Instructional Resources** - High quality resources are provided for teachers that apply locally and to each grade-level. These include field kits, science and stewardship tools, and nature-based literature.
- > **Independence** - We work with every teacher in the region to grow their personal connection and professional capacity to teach outside on their own.



We partner with public schools and visionary landowners to conserve and enhance natural areas as outdoor classrooms within a 10-minute walk of every public school in the Feather River Watershed and support teachers to teach from the land. Proximity breeds frequency, which is why we made it a goal to make sure every child was no farther away than a ten minute walk from an outdoor classroom near their school building.

— Rob Wade,
founder and coordinator,
Learning Landscapes