

Forest classroom opens the door to learning in West Paris

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By Nicole Carter

December 2, 2021



The bridge behind Agnes Gray Elementary School is the gateway to outdoor education for students.

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WEST PARIS — The wooded hillside behind Agnes Gray Elementary School is a backdrop for sixth-graders to learn about world civilizations such as ancient Greece and Rome.

Fifth-graders can visualize what it might have been like for George Washington's Continental Army wintering at Valley Forge in 1777-1778.

Fourth-graders study Native American cultures, and other classes have learned about mapping, plant life and applying mathematical solutions to real-life work challenges.

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Outdoor Education Coordinator Sarah Timm works with teachers to incorporate experiential learning into regular classroom curriculum. It is a philosophy the school has pursued for a couple of years.

A \$250,000 grant from the Maine Department of Education this year made it possible to expand programming, paying for Timm's salary, outdoor gear for students and a classroom yurt.

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Recently, the sixth grade class split into groups focused on building civilizations, assigned to different areas where they worked together to establish communities. Some had the benefit of a brook, a feature that affords protection, water and food. Others worked on the hillside where they found protection from weather and natural resources for shelter-building.

All had to keep in mind that other groups were competitive civilizations they would need to build a common economy, but that could also pose danger to their survival.

Building a civilization requires governance and defense. Five students discovered their shelter was damaged since the previous day and items they identified as weapons were gone. Together they explored what they needed for laws and punishment for such crimes and how to rebuild their "fort."

"We have laws so depending on the crimes, that's how we decide what punishments should be," sixth-grader Owen Gaul said. "There is destruction, and trespassing and theft here."

Another group in a low-lying area used the waterway as protection from invaders and established a stockade wall to protect them from outsiders.

By the end of the day students had to demonstrate that members of their civilization had secured food, water and shelter, had reliable defense and protection from other groups, had established a monetary system and trade economy, and could communicate with one another.

Timm said educators beyond the Oxford Hills School District have started calling on her as they start similar programs.

She said she expects the yurt to be delivered by the end of the school year, erected over the summer and ready for use next September.



Owen Seames of West Paris makes a mock bow and arrow using materials he traded from other civilization members in their outdoor classroom at Agnes Gray Elementary School in West Paris.
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“Due to the national yurt shortage, it won’t be here until June,” she said. “It will be a 30-foot classroom, fully furnished and equipped, with as much natural light as possible. It’ll give us an alternative spot for students in any kind of weather.”



Students work recently on their mock civilization site behind Agnes Gray Elementary School in West Paris. From left are Owen Gaul, Jadyn Campbell, Brenna Angevine, Sawyer Poland and Meshia Lee.
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