

Mt. Blue High School Connects Outdoor Learning to English and Language Arts



Key findings from ICF's external evaluation of RREV.

Background

In June 2020, the Maine Department of Education (MDOE) was awarded a \$16.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Rethink K-12 Education Models program to implement the Rethinking Responsive Education Ventures (RREV) program. The overarching purpose of RREV is to promote innovation in Maine schools so that all students across the state have access to high-quality and responsive learning opportunities. In August 2021, Mt. Blue High School received a RREV award to develop and implement the *Oxbow Outdoor Pilot*, which began in the 2021-22 school year. MDOE engaged an outside research firm, ICF, to conduct an evaluation of the RREV program, including implementation of this learning model at Mt. Blue.



The drainage pond behind Mt. Blue High School is used for practicing canoeing.

What Makes this Learning Model Innovative?

- Builds on previous successful after-school and outdoor club activities
- Intentional linkages between unique community assets, academic growth, and socio-emotional wellness
- Replicable and scalable across schools

About Mt. Blue's Innovative Learning Model

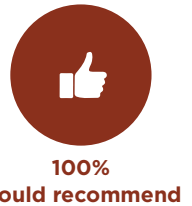
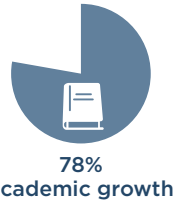
The Oxbow Outdoor Pilot program is a semester-long English Language Arts (ELA) course for students in grades 11 and 12, which includes a mix of classroom work and complementary outdoor activities. This has been accomplished using many different strategies:

- Mt. Blue engaged an ELA teacher to teach the course; additionally, a pre-engineering instructor at Foster-Career and Technical Education Center (F-CTC) advises on outdoor activities and their application to engineering concepts.
- Various outdoor equipment (e.g., life jackets, paddles, outdoor chairs, miscellaneous study materials) were purchased to enhance outdoor classes and activities.
- Outdoor activities include building outdoor camps, making maps, and working with canoes.
- Mt. Blue's partnership with the University of Maine system has resulted in participating students earning college credit through dual enrollment in courses such as Wilderness First Aid and Outdoor Leadership.

Promising Findings

ICF's evaluation of RREV revealed several exciting insights about the *Oxbow Outdoor Pilot* program. These include:

- **Student socio-emotional well-being has been enhanced.** While numerous factors contribute to overall mental and emotional wellness, some teachers observed that some students' emotional well-being showed improvement over the course of each semester. The pilot design team noted that PEAR assessment data showed improvements in all measured areas of emotional well-being, including resilience, learning and school engagement, and relationships.
- **Students have demonstrated academic growth during the 2021-22 school year.** Of all students that participated in the course, 78 percent received higher than a B. According to the course instructor, students demonstrated growth in many measurable hard skills related to course material, as well as soft skills, such as communication and leadership.
- **Students and families reported positive experiences.** Ninety-three percent of students agreed that they were glad they participated in the program, and 100 percent agreed that they liked their experience overall; 100 percent of families said that they would recommend this program to other families.



Future Plans

Mt. Blue is excited to be entering its second year of implementing this innovative learning model! Here are some things Mt. Blue has planned to ensure the long-term success of the *Oxbow Outdoor Pilot* program.

- **Transition to a full-year course.** Starting in the 2022-23 school year, the *Oxbow* curriculum will be offered through F-CTC as a full-year course, which will offer students a deeper experience because they will have opportunities for outdoor activities during all four seasons.
- **Increased focus on field trips.** *Oxbow* did not carry out any field trips during the 2021-22 school year; future field trips (including longer weekend trips) are anticipated throughout the 2022-23 school year.
- **Procurement of physical infrastructure.** Mt. Blue staff anticipate securing physical outdoor education infrastructure, including a new yurt, to provide non-traditional settings for classes and activities during the 2022-23 school year.
- **Procurement of transportation vehicles.** Mt. Blue staff anticipate securing a 21-passenger minibus and other outdoor equipment for day trips and longer weekend trips to outdoor recreation areas during the 2022-23 school year.

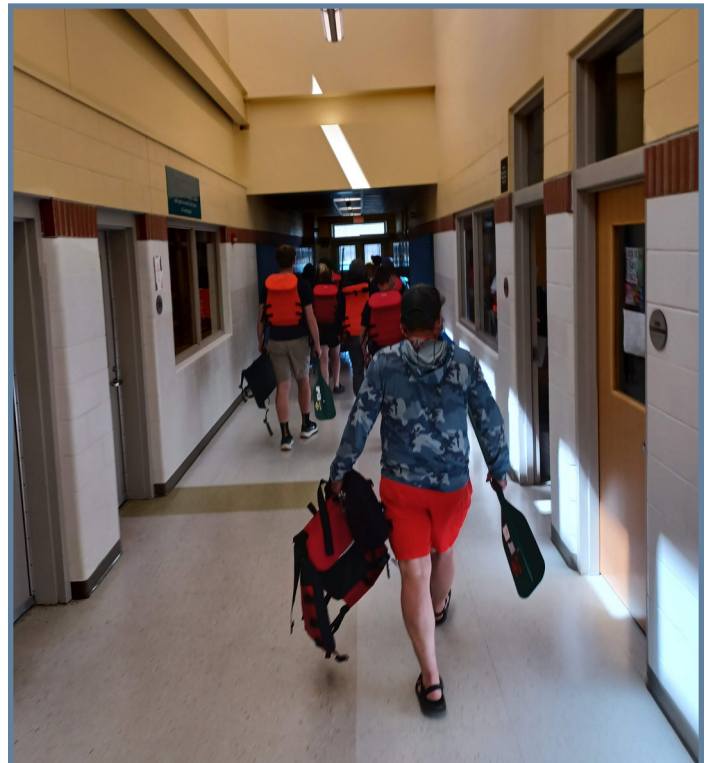


Image: Students in the *Oxbow* course going outside with their instructor to practice canoe paddling.