



Wild earth

***KINGSTON MIDDLE SCHOOL
NATURE CONNECTION AND
EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION PROJECT***

FINAL REPORT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
August, 2018





Wild Earth's *Kingston Middle School Nature Connection & Experiential Education Project* aims to enhance the social and emotional growth of students in Kingston City School District's two middle schools: J. Watson Bailey Middle School and M. Clifford Miller Middle School. The Kingston project has three component parts: 1) two day-long nature immersion field trips, one at the beginning and one at the end of the school year, 2) guided recess, and 3) an after-school program.

The evaluation of the Kingston initiative relied on quantitative and qualitative methods to measure progress toward project goals:

- Implementation of all project activities, including field trips for all 5th grade classes, thirty-two sessions of guided recess (sixteen in each school), and thirty-two after-school sessions (sixteen in each school) serving sixty at-risk students (thirty in each school).
- Growth in students' social and emotional wellness. Categories of social and emotional wellness were determined in the context of Wild Earth's goals and objectives and include: Positive peer interaction, empathy, confidence/self-efficacy, risk attitude, perseverance/grit, and comfort in nature.

The sample for this work included 202 5th grade students in both middle schools, their teachers, school administrators, guidance counselors, and lunch/recess monitors.

Findings

Overall, we find positive outcomes for Wild Earth's *Kingston Middle School Nature Connection & Experiential Education Project*. All school stakeholders were very enthusiastic about the project; school administrators, guidance counselors, teachers, and lunch monitors spoke very highly of it. Particularly meaningful praise came from a videogame-oriented student who told a teacher that Wild Earth is more fun than video games because he can "actually play with friends instead of talking over a headset."

Wild Earth achieved, and in some cases exceeded, its implementation goals

Field trips were held for all 5th grade classes; thirty-six guided recess sessions were convened (this exceeded the initial goal of thirty-two sessions); and thirty-four after-school sessions were conducted.

- *Field trips*: Field trips were staffed by nine Wild Earth instructors; one Wild Earth staff person served as the trip leader while other Wild Earth staff led small groups of students in activities (two instructors to a group). Field trips ran from 8:30am – 1:30pm: one in the fall, another in the spring. Students participated in small group activities designed to promote deep immersion into a specific skill and outdoor experience.
- *Guided recess*: Wild Earth staff conducted thirty-six guided recess sessions during the course of the year: eight in each school in the fall and ten in each school in the spring. Seven or eight Wild Earth instructors were present at each guided recess, serving approximately 200 students. During guided recess, Wild Earth instructors offered a range of activities for students, all of which were optional. Guided recess activities were designed to provide specific experiences, such as team building, risk taking, access to nature, or to provide an outlet for students' mid-day energy. Activities changed from week to week to provide variety and to attempt to engage and include different students each week.



- *After-school:* Wild Earth’s after-school program ran at both middle schools, once a week, for a little over one hour. Critically, it was convened during the regular after-school activity period, which meant that participants could take the late bus home. After-school activities mirrored those at guided recess and were implemented to align with students’ needs; the intent was to nurture positive relationships among participating students, deepen mentoring relationships between students and Wild Earth instructors, and promote deeper engagement with the natural world. Initially, the after-school program was to serve at-risk students referred by teachers and guidance counselors. Several school-based processes rendered this recruitment plan impractical, causing Wild Earth to have difficulty recruiting participants, particularly in one school. After Wild Earth adjusted its approach to accommodate the school’s processes, the after-school programs soared to capacity each week. Wild Earth was still able to serve students who were in need of mentoring or who showed an interest in the outdoors through this new recruitment strategy.

Positive outcomes: social and emotional wellness outcomes, recess referrals

Referrals are issued for student misbehavior at recess; we analyzed these to determine whether there was a difference in the number of referrals issued during guided recess days and non-guided recess days. Results show that there were three times as many referrals on non-guided recess days as there were on guided recess days.

These results cannot merely be attributed to the additional staff available to students on guided recess days. Data show that guided recess offered opportunity for productive play and provided structured outlets for children’s mid-day energy. Students gravitated to Wild Earth’s activities, which allowed them to run and be noisy, or to explore something new. According to one administrator, “They [Wild Earth activities] were structured, yet flexible, and provided additional support for students and also a focus. There was a lot less aimless running around [when Wild Earth was] here.”

Mixed outcomes: social and emotional wellness outcomes, student survey

A survey designed to measure social and emotional wellness was administered twice to a sample of 5th grade students: first in early fall, prior to the first Wild Earth field trip, and again in late spring, after the final field trip and after students had participated in guided recess and the after-school program. Social and emotional wellness was measured across six categories: positive peer interaction, empathy, confidence/self-efficacy, risk attitude, perseverance/ grit, and comfort in nature.

Each social and emotional wellness category was measured through multiple survey questions; these were then combined to provide an overall picture of student outcomes in each category. Analysis of the survey shows that outcomes on all of the categories were positive, but were not statistically significant. While this is disappointing, it is also not surprising. Social and



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emotional growth is difficult to measure quantitatively, particularly for an early adolescent population. Much can influence a child's responses to a survey about peers and friendships and internal sense of self on any given day. Nevertheless, the positive direction of outcomes on these measures is encouraging.

We further explored the data by analyzing each question individually. This analysis found responses to several to be positive and statistically significant, indicating student growth in these areas (none of the outcomes were negative and significant). Positive and significant outcomes fell into these social and emotional learning areas: positive peer interaction, confidence, perseverance, empathy, and comfort in nature. As stated, we should approach these findings cautiously, given the difficulties with quantitative measurement of social and emotional wellness. Nevertheless, the positive—and significant—outcomes are hopeful.

Positive outcomes: social and emotional wellness, qualitative data

Qualitative data suggest positive outcomes in all wellness categories, but particularly in the categories of positive peer interactions and perseverance.

By all accounts, Wild Earth activities promoted teamwork, cooperation, and positive peer interactions. Teachers noted, particularly during field trips, students' gracious and positive engagement with one another. "We saw students complimenting and encouraging each other during the field trips." Several teachers also observed students' willingness to work with classmates outside of their peer group. This is particularly meaningful for this age group, teachers felt, as students often cling to their friendship group in cliques. At recess, lunch monitors noted far fewer behavior issues on guided recess days than non-guided recess.

Examples of perseverance were noted particularly on the field trips. One teacher told of a student who demonstrated perseverance while on the Wild Earth field trip by embracing his role as "fire maintainer." This student, whose individualized education program (IEP) calls for frequent refocusing, was tasked with maintaining the fire by blowing on it. He concentrated on this job for a long time and without the "focus" reminders that he usually requires and that are specified in his IEP.

Several teachers felt that the grit and perseverance exhibited by some students during field trips was sustained throughout the school year. They told of students with behavioral challenges or students who become quickly frustrated when confronted with a challenging academic task who were able to demonstrate their capacity for focus and perseverance within the nature-based context of the Wild Earth field trip. Teachers were then able to use these moments of demonstrated perseverance as reminders to their students throughout the school year.

Findings outside of the stated social and emotional wellness categories

- *Institutionalization of Wild Earth:* Evidence of the value of Wild Earth is reflected in the ways that it is becoming an institutionalized component of both schools' programming to support social and emotional wellness of students. Both schools included Wild Earth as a part of their state-required School Comprehensive Education Plans, which detail a course for school improvement. School administrators asked Wild Earth staff to meet with teachers to build links between Wild Earth activities and the school curriculum; and both schools turned to Wild Earth for help with challenging recess behaviors.
- *Continuity of connection:* A foundational element of the Kingston project is to promote positive connection and interaction among youth and between youth and adults. Wild Earth attends to this by having consistent staffing throughout its programming. We witnessed these developed relationships; instructors using a



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common interest they might share with a student—music, sneakers, basketball, birds—to draw students into Wild Earth programming or even just to make a connection. The results were evident; we watched students flock to Wild Earth instructors during guided recess and several instructors could not move through the cafeteria without being surrounded by students.

The fact that several Wild Earth instructors are people of color was particularly meaningful for Kingston students, who themselves are a diverse group. Instructors were familiar with students' culture and could speak to them from that place of familiarity. The power of same-race adult mentors and role models cannot be underestimated.

- *Shared experience and transition to middle school:* School administrators and teachers emphasized the value of the Wild Earth field trips as a shared experience among classmates and teachers which, they felt, contributed to the building of a community. This was particularly meaningful for the 5th grade students, because of their newness to the middle school. Teachers felt that the fall field trip aided in students' transition to middle school by providing a fun, outdoor space for making new friends and developing a comfort level within their new school.
- *Demonstration of nonacademic strengths:* The Wild Earth field trip provided a setting where students could demonstrate non-academic strengths. Teachers, administrators, and guidance counselors noted that this helped to buoy students' confidence and also allowed teachers to see strengths in their students

that might not have surfaced in an academic setting. Teachers gained a new perspective on some students, which they were then able to carry back to the classroom and to future interactions with students.

Conclusion

Outcomes for the first year of Wild Earth's *Kingston Middle School Nature Connection & Experiential Education Project* are positive and encouraging. All project implementation goals were met—and sometimes exceeded—in this first year. Positive outcomes were identified for social and emotional growth. While we cannot claim that Wild Earth caused these, we can be certain that Wild Earth was part of the landscape within which Kingston City School District's middle school students learned and grew over the course of the year.

Importantly, both middle schools view Wild Earth as a fundamental part of their programming to enhance the social and emotional growth of their students. Wild Earth is included in their School Comprehensive Education Plans, which detail plans for school improvement. And school administrators included Wild Earth in a curriculum planning meeting to ensure deeper links between Wild Earth project activities and the school curriculum. Finally, both schools eagerly embraced the expansion of the Kingston project for the 2018–19 school year (two full-day field trips for all 6th graders, two guided recess sessions in both schools each week, and the inclusion of a 6th grade after-school program). The institutionalization of Wild Earth into the fabric of the schools will likely enhance its impact in the coming years.





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