

Conference enthusiasm inspires participants to advance mission of place-based education

Nearly 200 people from across the Great Lakes discovered just how valuable connections can be at the first-ever meeting of its kind in our region for educators and representatives of nonprofit, environmental, and conservation groups and government agencies interested in advancing place-based education in their communities.



Mary Whitmore
GLSI Program Coordinator

The 2011 Place-based Education Conference, held in early November in East Lansing, was coordinated by the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative and funded primarily by the Great Lakes Fishery Trust. The meeting was packed

with discussions and presentations focused on ways to get K-12 students out of the classroom and into their communities to learn about their local environment and practice environmental stewardship. The agenda and atmosphere encouraged the sharing of

ideas, resources, and information, and also provided time for informal networking.

Participants reported many benefits of attending the conference, including meeting new people, hearing national speakers, and feeling inspired and empowered. They also appreciated the diversity of offerings at the conference and the opportunity to learn about specific efforts in place-based education that are under way in the Great Lakes region.

One could argue that a meeting without a discernible “ripple” effect is probably not worth holding. A survey of conference participants showed that many, particularly teachers and those connected to the GLSI, left the meeting feeling motivated and inspired to use conference materials and advance place-based education locally.

What’s next? First, although we had initially planned to offer this conference every two years, we are committed to seeking additional financial support so that the meeting can be held annually.

Inside this Issue

Haslett teacher’s kindergarten class embraces initiative.....Page 2

Groundswell staff scores points by filling “baskets”.....Page 3

Map, contact information.....Page 4

Second, although we know that practicing and advancing place-based education is inspiring and important, it can also be challenging and—because it is still a relatively “rare” approach to teaching and learning—somewhat isolating. By exchanging ideas and sharing our passion about the work we are doing, we can accelerate progress toward our goal of establishing and sustaining place-based education.

To that end, the GLSI plans to establish an electronic community of learners for meeting attendees and others interested in place-based education so that the many benefits of the conference can be extended and expanded in the coming months. For more information, check our website in early 2012.

About the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative

The Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative (GLSI) was launched in 2007 to develop knowledgeable and active stewards of the Great Lakes through hands-on learning in the community. The GLSI helps students and their teachers collaborate with local organizations to study and address important environmental issues in their communities. In the process, students learn academic content and practice the skills of problem-solving and citizenship. The GLSI is expanding classrooms and strengthening communities across the state. We invite you to learn more about us and become involved in our efforts by visiting www.glstewardship.org, or following us on Facebook and Twitter.



GREAT LAKES
Stewardship Initiative

Spotlight:

Haslett teacher's kindergarten class embraces initiative

Shannon Murton, a developmental kindergarten teacher at Haslett Public Schools, recently sat down with staff and leaders of the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative to discuss place-based education.

Why did you want to become a part of the GRAND Learning Network/ the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative?

I have always believed in teaching the “whole” child and I wanted more opportunities for my students to be engaged in their learning. I also believe in creating a classroom community where children feel ownership and responsibility. Once I heard about this effort I thought it would be a wonderful opportunity to meet other educators who felt the same way.

How have you benefited professionally from the GRAND Learning Network/ the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative?

While I have great faith in my students and their abilities, I am still discovering all that I am capable of myself. Although I love science and nature, that is not my educational background and I never envisioned myself doing the things that I learned to do in our summer institutes. Would I have rafted down the Grand River without the gentle nudge from my colleagues Mark Stephens and Margaret Holtschlag? Would I have donned waders and walked into the Red Cedar River to look for macro-invertebrates? Would I have been able to spend a day researching and testing water samples on the D. J. Angus in Grand Haven? Never in my life had I envisioned



STEWARDS OF THE FUTURE: An eager group of young Haslett students get ready to dig into their next assignment for developmental kindergarten teacher Shannon Murton.

myself doing these things. Quite honestly I never felt knowledgeable enough or brave enough until the GRAND Learning Network came along to provide these experiences and also put me in touch with so many others who have a vision of stewardship and want to help. The whole process has opened my own eyes to my community and the people and resources available to us.

How have your students benefited from participating in place-based education efforts?

I think that when educators grow, their students do, too. It was two summers ago that I experienced my first summer institute and I came away from that experience thinking about “big ideas” I wanted my students to leave with that year. Leaders like Shari Dann encouraged me by providing opportunities to think about the GRAND Learning Network’s big ideas—watershed, place, community, and stewardship—and how they related to my 4- and 5-year-old students. How do I get these ideas down to their level? It was this same year that I was given a

new reading curriculum and had to really make a concerted effort to be true to the district curriculum, my beliefs in student-centered learning, and also this “place-based” vein that I wanted to flow through all we do. I came up with the following big ideas for the year:

- Bucket-filling philosophy (school-wide aspiration)
- Belonging (my place in this world)
- Environmental stewardship (interdependence of life)

We talked about stewardship all year as being responsible for our environment (people and things around us) and being aware of our impact on it. That means at home we clean up our toys and take care of our things. In school we do the same and we consider how what we do affects other people and things. We talk about how all of nature works together, that plants and animals need each other, and that every living thing needs water. And then we talk about what we can do to make a positive impact.

Continued on Page 3

Inside the Hub: Groundswell staff scores points by filling “baskets”

During the recent Place-based Education Conference hosted by the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative, guest speaker David Sobel said something that struck a chord with me: “Place-based education is the basket, not the egg.”

In one short phrase, Sobel succinctly explained place-based education metaphorically in the context of a farmer gathering eggs in a basket. Essentially, students are the farmers. The eggs represent the lessons educators use to teach subject area content and critical thinking skills. Students must gather and retain each “egg” in order to obtain a sufficiently broad body of knowledge. Finally, the basket represents the manner in which students go about acquiring and retaining knowledge and understanding of the world around them.

Sobel believes that place-based education should be manifest in schools as a standard method of teaching, as opposed to an individual project or opportunity that happens only in select classrooms.

How can schools achieve this paradigm shift? At Groundswell, one of the GLSI’s regional hubs, we continually encourage our teams to cultivate a school-wide culture of place-based education through which students and teachers can approach any subject at any grade level. There are many barriers—from budget cuts to administrative red tape—that can make this difficult to accomplish. Consequently, Groundswell and community partners have developed the Groundswell School Culture tool kit to assist teachers and administrators in making systemic changes in school culture and attitude toward place-based education.

Our tool kit addresses three major challenges: (1) time for collaboration and planning is a valuable but extremely limited resource; (2) communicating and collaborating with community organizations is challenging for educators who lack experience with such partnerships; and (3) it can be difficult to give students the autonomy necessary to implement high-quality place-based experiences while meeting curricular goals.

At Groundswell, we are committed to making place-based education look less like individual projects and more like a school-wide effort. Groundswell is encouraging its educators to begin weaving baskets. Most who do are amazed by their students’ bountiful harvest.

— *Michael Posthumus, Groundswell Program Coordinator*



Place-based education is a powerful way to teach and learn.

Spotlight

Continued from Page 2

My students have grown in many ways academically, meeting many science, math, social studies, and even language arts objectives. But perhaps most importantly, my students have felt empowered and proud of what they have accomplished. They also have experienced working with and being part of something bigger than themselves.

Why should teachers get involved with the Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative?

The Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative gives teachers the resources, education, and encouragement to help them take students on a lifelong journey. So often we (society, educators, and students) feel powerless to make an impact. There is a pervasive feeling that everyone else is making decisions for us and that there is a disconnect between the people in charge and ourselves. Place-based education puts the power back in our own hands by allowing us to be problem-solvers and make connections among students of different ages, community organizations, city and county government, and even businesses.

Why do you believe place-based education is important?

It empowers students and gives them ownership in their communities. It gives them a purpose to apply higher-order thinking skills and be problem-solvers. It gives students opportunities for hands-on learning and a way to be connected to nature and the community. It makes them think about the world and their impact on it and it allows students to experience people and things they might not have had a chance to encounter before. In the process we create engaged citizens who become part of the solution.

GLSI REGIONAL HUBS

The Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative (GLSI) works toward its goal of developing young stewards of the Great Lakes by funding regional hubs across the state. Currently there are eight hubs in Michigan, each led by experienced, qualified staff.

Through grants and technical assistance, the GLSI supports each hub's efforts to integrate three key strategies into its work with teachers, students, and community organizations in its service area:

- Place-based education focusing on local environmental issues
- Sustained professional development for teachers
- School-community partnerships

Each regional hub provides vital leadership, expertise, and material and financial resources to advance place-based education and support the collaborative stewardship efforts of students and community partners.

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