



The Daily Gleaner

August 1, 2009

A New Kind of Classroom

Recently a friend of mine made me aware of an interesting environmental project he has been working on at Devon Middle School. Dr. Dave Riddell is an ecologist and environmental educator working with the Environment and Sustainable Development Research Centre (ESDRC) and Fredericton Area Watersheds Association (FAWA) at UNB, where he also teaches. Through ESDRC and FAWA, Dave has spent the past five years working on a number of environmental teaching projects, including the development of an outdoor classroom at Devon Middle School.

Late in 2005, representatives from FAWA met with the Principal and the art, science, and social studies teachers at the school; all of whom were enthusiastic and supportive of the project. The group then worked together to develop a site plan and to identify means by which outdoor activities could be effectively integrated into their existing curriculum. After a few years of careful planning—including receiving designs from students, implementing safety measures and securing permits—the project at Devon Middle School began to take shape.

With cash and in-kind support from the Fredericton Community Foundation, City of Fredericton, JD Irving, and District 18, volunteers (including school staff and students) began to build their own outdoor classroom, which now includes a tree nursery, an organic vegetable garden, and a constructed wetland. Recent work at Devon, including the introduction of native wetland plants and the installation of interpretive signage, was made possible with support from Fredericton's northside Giant Tiger who raised \$1000 in just three weeks at their store check-outs.

Outdoor classrooms, or 'schoolyard habitats', are geared toward schools that often lack opportunities for outside education due to limited budgets and short class times preventing students from participating in field trips. The construction of schoolyard habitats, and the use of hands-on cross-curricular learning experiences that embrace these local resources, serve to address this deficiency. Moreover, outdoor classrooms can be utilized as a teaching resource and professional development for teachers.

Interestingly, Dave has already noticed frogs and dragonflies inhabiting the new wetland. He suspects they have made their way from areas behind Neill's farm or around Leo Hayes High School where land has been cleared for development.

Another recent example of this type of project is FAWA's schoolyard habitat near Garden Creek Elementary School. In this case, the habitat was already in place: in a span of only 200 metres lie four ecosystems—forest, wetland, grassland, and the creek! The team has built a low-impact looped pathway

through the area, and soon interpretive signs will be installed, as well as an observation deck beside the creek, and a storytelling platform in the grassland area.

Elsewhere in the city, other groups such as the Connaught Street School and Family Association (CSSFA), under the direction of Tina LeJeune and principal, Melanie Wood, are working hard on the Connaught Street School 'Living Playground' – which is both an outdoor classroom and a playground naturalization project.

The Living Playground began in earnest in the spring with construction of planters for the students to grow plants and vegetables in – and indeed, the plants are thriving! The work will eventually include redesign of the steep and eroding hillside behind the school, by introducing local-species trees and plants and a winding learning path complete with interpretive signage. An important project goal is to raise awareness of climate change issues and promote sustainable development practices, such as erosion prevention, water conservation, and greenhouse gas reduction (carbon capture) by planting large shade trees. Down the road this will also benefit the school's energy usage as the trees will protect the building from the hot summer sun and cold winter winds. There is no doubt that these are lifelong environmental lessons for our students - the next stewards of our sacred earth.

These outdoor classrooms will provide learning opportunities for the Fredericton public as well as the students, as they will increase environmental awareness and knowledge, while offering additional means of participation in our children's education. And all the while, reinforcing the importance of local environmental stewardship in our little corner of the planet.

To read more about these projects you can visit Dave's blog at <http://daveriddell.weebly.com>

Valerie Hillier is a Frederictonian who lives with the environment in mind. She encourages you to do the same – one small step at a time. If you would like to contact the Green Matters team email greenmatters@fredericton.ca.