

Kansas Case Study

Service Valley Charter Academy teacher, Theresa Farris, explains how their school's **O**utdoor **W**ildlife **L**earning **S**ite and pocket prairie were started and how they have benefited the students and school.

I attended the KACEE Conference in western Kansas where I heard about Brad Guhr with Dyck Arboretum of the Plains and the Earth Partnership for Schools (EPS) program. I went back home after the conference and shared the information with our Principal, Mr. Ray Huff. Mr. Huff and I received a scholarship to attend the EPS summer institute at Dyck Arboretum of the plains. We received a K-12 curriculum guide during the institute and guidance on completing the application for the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism's Outdoor Wildlife Learning Sites or OWLS program. We filled out the application, which includes grant money to help schools get their OWLS site started. We are a charter school, so initially we were able to start our OWLS site using charter funds with support of the OWLS grant funding as well. Currently our OWLS site consists of two different prairie sites.

The first site is a one acre section of school grounds we planted a year ago this spring. K-8 students spread the seeds with a lesson called the "Prairie Stomp." The first two years we have seen some differences in the site, but it takes three to five years for prairie plants to get established. We will complete our first prairie burn in early spring of 2015. This year students will complete research on options for a wildlife water source to be included in the prairie site.

The second site was planted in the fall of 2012. We planted a pocket prairie garden along the north side of the lower elementary building with over 100 plants. The whole school took part in planting the pocket garden. The difference in the garden since we planted it is amazing and it looks wonderful. The plants have tripled in size and we will be able to collect seeds this fall. The students were included in every step of getting the prairies established. The students being part of the entire process of planning, planting, and maintenance has been a great experience for the teachers, as well as, the students.

Teachers have been utilizing the prairie site by taking students on nature walks to view the changes throughout the school year. Students keep track of their observations by journaling about what they noticed. Upper grade students have researched the seeds that were planted in the prairie and measured the area of the prairie using lessons from the curriculum guide from Earth Partnership to Schools. One of the students' projects for the future will be taking pictures of each of the prairie plants. They will then research the plant information, and include that information when designing the sign for the OWLS site.

Primary grade students will be doing activities within the prairie site from the early childhood environmental education guides – Growing Up WILD and Project Learning Tree's Environmental Education for Early Childhood that we received through KACEE workshop trainings. Students will be doing things such as tracking animals, looking at habitats and prairie plant life to see what changes in insect and wildlife sightings there have been since the prairies were first started. Kindergarten students will also be doing a pen pal project with other kindergarten students in Nebraska where they will discuss the differences in the Kansas and Nebraska prairies.

Additionally, we have been talking about using iPads to do weekly "prairie talk" videos when in bloom. Using technology will give the students a chance to work on research and present facts about the prairies that will connect to the common core standards. Our principal has also been uploading pictures and info on the prairie to our Facebook page and sharing in the social media world.

We have already seen many benefits to the students and school from having the two prairies. One of the benefits has been just getting the students outside and giving them a chance to learn outside. We have witnessed several students show initiative when learning in the outdoor environment that do not normally show up when in the traditional classroom setting.

Prairie education compliments our school's charter teaching using agriculture. Understanding the importance of environmental education and learning how to be good stewards of the land teaches our students that we have to take care of the land for it to take care of us.

Upper and lower grade teachers have related our prairie habitats to Kansas History. Giving the students a feel for what Kansas looked like before it was settled. The prairie habitats' give the students a chance to get out of the classroom, and explore. It allows teachers a way to give students a needed "brain break" from the classroom setting that provides a unique hands on approach to learning. There are also benefits to the teachers as it gives them a chance to enjoy being outdoors.

I would definitely recommend all of the KACEE materials, and Earth Partnership for Schools program. These curriculum guides have served as our main resources on how to get started and provided us with activities and lessons to use in the prairie habitats.



Left: Planting the 1 acre prairie and doing the "Prairie Stomp" lesson



Right: 1 acre prairie in the first year



Left: planting the prairie pocket garden in fall 2012



Right: prairie pocket garden today, summer 2014