

Environmental center helps schools with garden plans, outdoor classrooms

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Posted:

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When plans for a nearby school ended up being delayed a half-decade ago, officials from the High Plains Environmental Center retained their focus to get children outdoors.

In 2008, Thompson School District suspended plans to build a school in the High Plains area in eastern Loveland, until the project was revived this year with a second round of planning for a pre-K- through eighth-grade school with a focus on science, technology, engineering and math.

"When the school got put on the back burner in 2008, HPEC turned outreach to other schools in Thompson School District," said Jim Tolstrup, executive director of the center, 1854 Piney River Drive.

The center — 275 acres of open space founded in 2001 and funded through an environmental assessment fee — focuses on conserving the area's native bio-diversity by working with developers, builders, businesses and residents on community design, land stewardship and sustainable practices. For youths, the center offers an eco-literacy program to get them outdoors exploring their surroundings and learning about the basic functions of the natural world.

"Our focus is not on preserving a remote wilderness," Tolstrup said. "It's on nature playscapes at schools or in neighborhood open spaces."

Initially, students from Thompson School District took field trips to the facility to see wildlife, to plant and harvest crops in an educational garden and to participate in other programs, Tolstrup said. Center leaders soon realized several schools in the district lacked funding for the field trips and instead began visiting the schools to bring lessons to them on horticulture, ecology and wildlife, he said.

With this change, High Plains Environmental Center has helped several schools create vegetable, native plant and pollinator gardens, build outdoor classrooms and even repair a greenhouse. So far, the nonprofit has provided support and guidance for projects at Big Thompson, Centennial, Cottonwood Plains, Namaqua, Ponderosa, Truscott and Van Buren elementary schools, Walt Clark Middle School and Ferguson High School.

Specifically, the nonprofit helped with vegetable gardens at Truscott and Van Buren, re-vegetating a stormwater pond at Centennial and designing and developing an outdoor classroom at Namaqua, donating native grasses and wildflowers grown in its nursery.

The Truscott garden has been around for five years, said Jenny Pond, garden committee member and a kindergarten teacher at the school. Students work in the garden after school, though the kindergartners work there during the school day, she said.

"(HPEC) helps support us with professional input," Pond said, adding that the nonprofit offers suggestions on the best plants for the area and where to access them. "As teachers, we're

experienced in teaching and not necessarily in gardening."

At Namaqua, the center helped the school identify the best native shrubs, grasses and perennials for its outdoor classroom.

"They're just really knowledgeable about the native plants that are supposed to do really well in our soil type," said Michelle Mandeville, who leads Namaqua Outdoors, an after-school ecology program. "The cool thing about planting with native plants is we don't have to use a lot of water once the plant is established."

Center officials want more schools to have gardens and outdoor classrooms and use them for educational programming, said Connie Gray, education and outreach manager for High Plains.

"It's getting kids outdoors and their hands in the dirt. You cannot teach a lot of this stuff in the classroom," Gray said.

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