

# Brattleboro Reformer

## TAKE IT OUTSIDE

### Nature schools can offer guidance as 'regular' schools reopen



By Bob Audette

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BRATTLEBORO — No one really knows what school will look like when, or if, it resumes in the fall.

But some outdoor educators say there is already a method in place that local school administrators could adapt to keep their students educated and safe at the same time.

"Teachers are being told to take their classes outside this fall," said Sam Stegeman, executive director of the Vermont Wilderness School, which is currently holding summer camp at Fort Dummer in Brattleboro and at the Manitou Project in Williamsville. "Summer camps may have lessons to offer."

Stegeman said he and the staff had been planning for the summer camps since March, with

the fourth week of camp finishing up on Friday. He said guidance from the Vermont Department of Health has helped make the preparation for summer camp a little easier.

"We had to learn a lot on the go," Stegeman said, adding "But for outdoor camp it was easy to exceed the guidelines."

One thing the staff quickly learned, he said, is "The kids can do this. They are being asked to physically distance, wear masks and wash their hands. These kids are making a thousand good decisions each day."

Stegeman said within a few days of starting camp, it almost feels like a normal, non-pandemic summer camp.

"We are teaching awareness, adaptability and resilience," he said. "What we are teaching hasn't changed, but we have had

**Camper Charlie Jellema-Harter, left, and VWS staff member Tejas Moses work on an outdoor project together.**

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**Campers from the Vermont Wilderness School embark on a hike through the woods.**

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Stegeman said the camp is running three different groups right now that do not come within 30 feet of each other.

"We started with a group of five kids, one staff member and one teen helper and we just raised that to six kids," he said. "We are also lucky in that we don't have a lot of surfaces that need to be sanitized."

Stegeman said he wants to talk to teachers about how they can safely offer outdoor classes in the fall.

"If we can share some of the lessons we have learned, we'd be more than happy to do so," he said. "We can also help teachers consider what resources they will need for spending longer stretches — even full days — outside, no matter the weather. The easy part is that nature is

such a great teacher that many of the lessons present themselves once we step outside."

Vermont's school reopening guidelines will require that children wear masks at school unless they are outside and more than 6 feet apart, and the guidelines recommend moving classes outdoors.

Getting outdoors might just be what students, and their teachers, need this summer and into the fall, said Stegeman.

"Quarantine living has been tough on children," he said. "They need social interaction, physical activity, and time outdoors. Even without camp, the warm summer months offer a time for children to break free from the screen time that for so many has characterized quarantine living."

VWS will also offer weekday programs this fall to help families







and teachers figure out a path forward.

"We'll do one or two full days," Stegeman said. "I don't know of an outdoor school that has enough demand to offer a full five-day-week school year. But there may be more demand for that now. It's safe, there's a big trend toward outdoor education and the natural world is a natural teacher."

The Vermont Wilderness School's day camp has been held every summer at Fort Dummer State Park for the past 15 years.

"There's plenty of space out here for physical distancing," says Camp Director Bob Etzweiler. "The challenge, of course, is training the kids to do something that they have had zero time to practice, and which needs to be done perfectly."

"It's been a partnership with the parents," said Stegeman. "From

the start we all agreed that this is an experiment we're entering together. Some of our best ideas have come from parents and their children. It's a brand new situation for all of us, so collaboration is the key."

#### NATURE EXPLORERS

Stegeman said area teachers also have another resource available to them, the Bonnyvale Environmental Education Center, which has been offering summer camps for nearly three decades.

But early in the pandemic, BEEC staff decided they could not safely offer summer camps this year. Instead, BEEC's staff put together Nature Explorers Kits that families can use to host their own small summer camps at home.

"We got ideas from kids, topics that they are really interested in," said Joan Carey, BEEC's environmental educator.

**Camp Director Bob Etzweiler uses a 6-foot branch to demonstrate physical distancing to campers (l to r) Lucy Mnookin, George Arnold, and Owen Turner.**

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Each kit includes equipment, materials, activities, reference books, and story books. They are available on a sliding scale, from \$35 to \$100, but no one is turned away for lack of funds, said Carey.

"We are also, on a limited scale, continuing to offer some online resources for parents," she said. "That's how we got through the end of the last school year, with kids being sent home. We ended up creating about two dozen videos for remote learning that are available on our website."

BEEC has an active relationship with elementary schools in Windham County and in Hinsdale, N.H., offering "forest classroom" guidance for the past three years, though it has been running school programs for 25 years.

Carey said teachers rely on the programs offered by BEEC and despite the challenges and uncertainty, they can continue to rely on BEEC.

"Last spring, we were shooting from the hip," Carey said. "Now, we are in the process of planning for a very uncertain future. We need to stay flexible and agile and continue to communicate. We might be able to offer outdoor classroom assessment. We can work on a protocol so that they can establish safe and stimulating outdoor areas."

She also hopes to coordinate with the folks at Vermont Wilderness School.

"How can we work together to be supporting our schools in our own unique ways?" she asked.

Most importantly, said Carey, is helping teachers so they don't feel overwhelmed because teaching outdoors is not "a comfortable space" for all teachers."

We can help them translate what they are doing in the classroom into outdoor lessons," said Carey.

"This spring, BEEC created some really amazing virtual programs for students," said Lindsey Glabach Royce, who teaches fifth- and sixth-graders at Dummerston School. "In some ways, BEEC was able to create opportunities that students couldn't have in a classroom setting, indoor or out. There is likely no way a class of 25 students tramping through the woods would ever be able to encounter a close-up view of a porcupine or a beaver in its native habitat. However, BEEC creatively found a way in a short amount of time to show students how to respectfully and thoughtfully engage with nature, while teaching them about friends in our local forests."

My students loved these

delightful virtual lessons," said Lilly DePino, who teaches kindergarten at Dummerston School. "They served as a common experience we were all having despite our individual lock-down locations."

Antioch University's Inside-Outside Advisory Group is also offering guidance for teachers.

Carey said she is also preparing for the eventuality that while schools might start up again in the fall, they might be forced to shutdown if the pandemic isn't under control.

"One remote learning option BEEC hopes to have set up will be a menu of environmental projects students would be able to choose from," she said. "This might include activities related things such as biodiversity, landscape and history. We are also getting inquiries from families planning to home school in the fall. We would love to find a way to support those children, too."

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Teachers and administrators can reach BEEC at [joan@beec.org](mailto:joan@beec.org) and VWS at [office@vermontwildernessschool.org](mailto:office@vermontwildernessschool.org).

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