

St. Anne's thinks outside the school box, builds outdoor classroom

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Middletown, Del. -



On Sept. 29, Matt Wolinski held a discussion with his seventh-grade American society students in the outdoor classroom at St. Anne's Episcopal School, which opened last week.

A group of students discussed defying conventional thinking while surrounded by nature in an unconventional classroom at St. Anne's Episcopal School in Middletown on Sept. 29.

Under a roof but without any walls is how Matt Wolinski's seventh-grade American society class learned the foundation behind transcendentalism.

Wolinski and his students jumped at the opportunity to take advantage of the newly-constructed outdoor classroom on the school's campus.

The pavilion-like classroom will soon have benches and tables that students of all subjects can utilize to get closer to the outdoors and expand their minds.

Wolinski aimed to teach his students about transcendentalism by transcending the school's walls.

"The outdoor environment is better for the lessons that are more abstract," he said. "It's good for challenging conventions and gives the students an immediate example of thinking literally outside the box of school."

The outdoor classroom was funded by Delaware Foundations, the Chichester duPont Foundation, the Marmot Foundation and the Crystal Trust.

A blessing ceremony to officially open the outdoor classroom was held last week when the Rev. Louise Howlett, Bishop Wayne Write of the Episcopal Church Diocese of Delaware and Board of Trustees Chair Gordon Brownlee visited for the school's annual Founders' Day Chapel service.

Head of School Peter Thayer said the outdoor classroom opens the students to their great campus and allows them to explore the nature around them.

"It's a place they can gather and focus on what they discover," he said. "I've always been a believer that kids learn by observing. If they can see something in person, an oak leaf or owl pellet, that makes it more real."

Lisa Chase, director of marketing and development at St. Anne's, said the outdoor classroom will serve many purposes and can be beneficial for all subjects, especially art and science.

The pavilion is not only surrounded by trees, but also has a view of Silver Lake.

"Because the school has access to a dock and a lake, students will have the opportunity to study the ecosystem in a meaningful and authentic way," Chase said. "Students can look for and discover different insect, animal, bird and plant species, while having access to information about the species. They can test water samples and can prepare plantings for our gardens around the school."

She said the outdoor classroom coincides with the school's philosophy of being good stewards to the Earth.

"The school fosters the conservation interests of students and faculty through the Green Club, which is a student organization dedicated to applying conservation practices to our school community," Chase said. "By building a 'green' outdoor classroom, we are demonstrating to our students both our commitment to the Earth and our desire to broaden the educational experiences."

Thayer said he believes being in a classroom without walls not only teaches students to appreciate nature, but also allows them to open their minds a bit more.

"I love when our kids can get outside and be in the fresh air and smell what's out there," he said. "In an open classroom, there's an openness of thinking, of dreaming, of allowing the creativity."

Seventh-grader Payton Beard said she enjoyed being in the outdoor classroom.

"I have freedom to talk and express my ideas instead of being inside solid walls," she said. "It helps us appreciate nature."

Wolinski, who was part of the committee that created the outdoor classroom, said being outside is an important experience for students.

"We can find ways to integrate lessons outdoors, plus it's fun and gives students something to look forward to," he said. "It's hard to harp on protecting the Earth while sitting in a climate controlled environment. It helps with character development, too."

Chase said the outdoor classroom is a place where students can be a little more messy than they could be indoors, which provides freedom for students to explore various materials in art or science. It also will help inspire students in language arts, creative writing or drama courses.

"To be connected with the environment and to learn within it is something we really wanted to have," she said. "The outdoors offer children some unique and diverse opportunities for active learning and open the door for teachers to develop imaginative lessons."

Chase said there are plans for a greenhouse to be built adjacent to the classroom.

Thayer said they hope to install solar panels to the roof of the classroom in the future to run electricity outside and install rain barrels to provide water.

"We're hoping it's going to become a model for our 'green' school," he said. "We have a lot of natural environment around us, which is a real luxury."