

# Rethinking the School Yard



By DANIEL MOFFATT  
special to The Guide

newly designated school forests provided context for the budding field of conservation education.

Now, 80 years later, two schools partnering with the Northeast Michigan Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative network are reaping the benefits of the historical deed.

At Johannesburg-Lewiston Area Schools, students in the environmental science and AP Biology classes are busy blazing a trail along a historic railroad grade that connects to a learning platform in the school's 40-acre parcel of natural forest, bog and grassland.

Due to a lack of trails this forest area has been largely

inaccessible, greatly limiting educational opportunities and community use of the site.

Now in the project's third year, the boardwalk is complete and the learning platform should be finished before school ends this summer. With only 60 minutes to devote to the boardwalk each day, classes worked hard this fall placing pre-fabricated sections that were constructed by the school's wood shop students.

Winter is time for the consulting forester to mark trees and do a timber sale. That venture left behind a few skid trails on the frozen ground and the class plans to capitalize on those cleared paths in developing a larger trail. In his teaching style, teacher Kevin Kennedy allows students to make most all project decisions – from trail placement and interpretive design to developing educational activities for younger students.

The project is enhanced through community partners like the Otsego Conservation District, where administrator Patricia Osburn offers expertise and advice in site management, planning and design.

When finished, Johannesburg-Lewiston's project will serve as a demonstration site, teaching students and the community the importance of responsible land management by creating and maintaining healthy ecosystems. In addition to examples of forest and wildlife management, the nature trails will also feature interpretive signs describing important historical events that occurred at the site.

For a "sweeter" product, journey 75 miles southeast, where Alcona Community Schools utilize their school forest in a far different way.

This time of year, Alcona High School advanced agriscience students and the school's FFA prepare for maple syrup season. In the demonstration forest located behind the school, students are responsible for identifying and tapping sugar maples, checking sap flow and more. In syrup season, the work means leaving class to collect sap for syrup production.

Not only does the school forest provide an on-site learning center, the project has



Students at Johannesburg-Lewiston Area Schools lay the decking to the school's learning platform in their wooded 40-acre parcel.

**NORTHEAST MICHIGAN** – It wasn't until 1934 when public schools in Michigan began to teach conservation of our natural resources. Within 20 years, more than 600 school forests were created, a number of them coming from land the state acquired during the Great Depression.

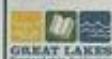
Many welcomed this field of study as the land – ravaged by the lumber industry and wildfires – was desperate for relief and the



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proven to be a profitable endeavor for the school through an annual community event.

Maple Syrup Celebration Day is held each year at the school's on-site Sugar Shack, a hands-on maple syrup processing facility. While educating the community about the student's project, as

well as providing exposure for the National FFA Organization, the event raises community awareness about the tasty products and economic value of our northern woodlands.

On a guided tour, community members see the syrup process from sap collection to bottling, lead by the students who have become experts on the subject. Interestingly, this project is one of two FFA Chapters in the state of Michigan that produces maple syrup; selling the syrup is a main source of income for the Alcona FFA Chapter - without it, the Chapter would not be as prosperous as it is today.

Though over-cutting and devastation of the land lead to the granting of land to schools, it has resulted in great opportunity today. Both schools are outstanding examples of how the land can be managed for good and developed as exceptional learning sites, not only for the

students, but also for each person within the community. ♣



Alcona High School FFA students host public demonstrations on the process of maple syrup making during the Maple Syrup Celebration Day.

### The Alcona FFA Chapter Annual Maple Syrup Celebration Day

Held on northern Michigan's official Maple Syrup Weekend.

9 a.m. to 2 p.m. March 22

At the Alcona FFA Sugar Shack located behind Alcona Community High School in Lincoln.

FFA members will provide guided tours of the maple syrup production facility and visitors can enjoy a pancake and sausage breakfast topped with liquid-gold produced by Alcona FFA members.

Event is free, donations welcome.



## The Northeast Michigan Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative

[www.NEMIGLSI.org](http://www.NEMIGLSI.org)

The Northeast Michigan Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative is a regional partnership of schools and community partners working to promote place-based, community-based learning experiences. This network serves to engage youth as partners in protecting our Great Lakes and natural resources of Northeast Michigan through hands-on, feet-wet learning in (and with) the community.

Visit **NEMIGLSI** online to see projects in action & learn how *you* can participate  
[www.NEMIGLSI.org](http://www.NEMIGLSI.org)



### The NE MI GLSI supports:

- **Place-based education programs with youth:** Hands-on, place-based education is a proven method for developing knowledgeable and active stewards of the environment.
- **Educators and school improvement:** Through training and professional development for teachers, NEMI GLSI supports the use of best practices that maximize the effectiveness of PBE.
- **Strong school-community partnerships:** Schools and communities working together producing powerful partnerships that are beneficial to all.

Funding in support of the NE MI GLSI provided by Great Lakes Fishery Trust, Community Foundation for NE MI, NOAA B-WET, and Toyota 4-H20, among many other local contributing partners.

**Help NE MI GLSI support youth development and environmental stewardship in our communities!**

To donate contact:  
Community Foundation for  
Northeast Michigan  
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