

CASE STUDY

Prairie Crossing Charter School: A Role Model for Curriculum Redesign Using Sustainability Minded Curriculum Coaching

DISTRICT PROFILE

Location | Grayslake, Illinois
Number of students | 432 students in grades K-8

Place-based education and outdoor learning have been central to Prairie Crossing Charter School's (PCCS) pedagogy since the school opened in 1999. An environmentally focused public charter school, PCCS was founded on the idea that nature is an important and powerful teacher and that learning in and from nature is key to developing environmental literacy and a sense of place.

THE PROBLEM

Despite being a recognized leader in environmental education, PCCS had drifted away from embracing whole school practices. Geoff Deigan, PCCS's Executive Director, wanted to change that by reenergizing the curriculum and focusing on sustainability. This led PCCS to make two significant shifts to their curriculum in 2017. First, the school expanded their environmental focus to include the other Es of sustainability: equity and economic prosperity. Second, PCCS decided to adopt a more integrated approach to their curriculum by increasing their use of place-project-problem-based learning (P3BL). To accomplish this task, PCCS approached Green Schools National Network (GSNN) to help them integrate education for sustainability (Efs) and P3BL into their curriculum.

OUR IMPACT

Beginning in June 2017, GSNN led several strategic planning and visioning sessions with PCCS's leadership team and administrative staff, facilities and operations personnel, and lead grade-level teachers. The purpose of these sessions was to build background knowledge and examine best practices related to Efs and P3BL, assess where PCCS currently stood, and set goals for the next five years. These sessions led PCCS to identify an overarching goal to guide their curriculum redesign: Prairie Crossing Charter School demonstrates growth each year on all academic standards through an integrated curriculum grounded in education for sustainability, service learning, and place-project-problem-based learning (P3BL).

Working with GSNN, PCCS developed a five-year action plan that would guide them through the curriculum redesign process. The action plan included a multi-year professional development plan that would help PCCS faculty and staff refine their understanding of Efs best practices and create a P3BL rubric that would shape the design and delivery of curriculum.



RESULTS

With a foundation in place, PCCS formed a curriculum committee in late 2017 that included the Dean for Environmental Learning and faculty representatives from all grade levels. Committee members researched P3BL strategies and created rubrics to help teachers recognize and create high-quality P3BL units. The committee then developed a series of content standard summaries based on the Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education's Education for a Sustainable Future: Benchmarks for Individual and Social Learning that PCCS teachers subsequently used to create a matrix of age-appropriate learning targets for each Efs standard, across all grades and subject areas.

The transition to an Efs-based, P3BL curriculum began in earnest in 2018. Since then, PCCS teachers have worked to modify, overhaul, and create units that incorporate P3BL components and tie in Efs standards. Although PCCS is still in the early stages of its shift to an Efs-based P3BL approach, the impact on student learning and engagement has been significant. Projects are authentic and interdisciplinary, and students are gaining collaboration, communication, and critical thinking skills as they work to identify solutions to real-world problems. Student motivation has also skyrocketed, and the classroom has become a place where students choose to come. The impact on PCCS faculty is also noteworthy. The whole school has bought into this new way of teaching and learning, and teachers report that they feel like they are active participants in the learning process alongside their students.