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Vadnais Heights Elementary Revitalizes Outdoor Classroom

VADNAIS HEIGHTS, Minn. – Vadnais Heights Elementary School recently received funding that allows the school community to collaborate with Tamarack Nature Center (Ramsey County Parks and Recreation) to rejuvenate a designated section of the school’s seven acre outdoor forest and wetland area. The area, originally created by Tamarack Nature Center Lead Naturalist Anna Newton and Vadnais Heights Elementary teachers, will once again be used to reinforce science and environmental education for students. In addition, Tamarack Nature Center will work closely with teachers in the delivery of science-based standards utilizing an outdoor, natural setting.

The innovative project has seen support from a variety of sources, including a \$4000 Brosious Teaching Grant from the White Bear Lake Area Educational Foundation, a \$1000 donation by the Vadnais Heights Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) and a \$1500 Exemplary Grant from the White Bear Lake Area School District’s Teaching and Learning Office.

“We are thrilled to be able to enhance our already strong curriculum with this experiential learning opportunity for our students,” said PTO co-chair Janna Rohlinger. “We know that students learn in many different ways, and we believe this partnership with Tamarack Nature Center will allow us to reach more students effectively.”

The program is a timely one, with a growing public consensus as to the vital role Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) and Environmental education has in the 21st century. Increased attention has been given to the importance of environmental stewardship, the growth of “green jobs” as a driver of global economics, and the need for increasing opportunities for hands-on, outdoor learning for this generation of students.

“It has been reported that this could very well be the first generation that lacks meaningful connections to nature and the environment,” reported Mary Vidas, Tamarack Nature Center Director. “White Bear Lake Area Schools is a model for integrating nature-based education as a means of supporting student learning. Their active commitment provides students with an opportunity to gain from important educational benefits this connection offers.”

Project planning and implementation will launch in December and run through the 2010-11 academic school year. Second grade classrooms will work with Tamarack Nature Center’s Lead Naturalist staff to begin mapping the designated area. Teachers will also meet with Tamarack’s Naturalists to coordinate lessons that will be taught to various grade levels in the Spring.

The District’s partnership with Tamarack Nature Center has resulted in various science and environmental educational initiatives that support students understanding of the sciences and the environment. Tamarack provides Star Lab classes for the district’s schools. Students at Otter Lake Elementary (located across the street from Tamarack Nature Center) are now in their fourth year in Tamarack’s outdoor environmental learning programs, in which Sunrise Park Middle Schools and other District schools also participate. In addition, the District’s Early Childhood Program collaborates with Tamarack Nature Center to provide *My Nature Preschool*, in which children are enrolled in nature-based Play and Learn and Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) classes. With the expansion of Tamarack Nature Center’s Destination for Discovery project, the District and Tamarack Nature Center currently are exploring wind and solar energy initiatives that will offer additional learning opportunities for students.

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