

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

9 Schools in Green Sweep

Lexington, VA – September 23, 2015. Nine area schools have just been recognized by the Commonwealth for exemplary efforts to increase environmental awareness and stewardship among their students. The nine local schools were among just fifty-six schools state-wide deemed “Virginia Naturally Schools,” by the VA Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF), the department charged with administering the annual program.

Honored schools had to demonstrate commitment to environmental stewardship in a number of areas. These areas include ensuring students have access to high-quality nature-based learning, supporting related teacher training, working with community partners, and advancing earth care actions like gardening or recycling. After initial recognition, schools commit to more “green” practices each year, thus becoming leaders in the green school movement. The program supports a 2015 Executive Order signed by Governor McAuliffe calling for increased environmental education and stewardship within the state’s public school system.

While several local schools in the past have secured recognition, the sweep of nine is unprecedented. “It’s inspiring to see these schools get the recognition they deserve,” said Elise Sheffield, education director of Boxerwood Nature Center who nominated the nine. “The recognition highlights this community’s commitment to ensuring all students grow up learning how to care for our home, the natural world.” According to Sheffield, that cross-the-board commitment within one county is without parallel in Virginia: “it’s a Rockbridge trademark!”

The nine honored schools represent all three local school divisions. In Buena Vista, Enderly Heights Elementary and Parry McCluer Middle School received third year and second year awards respectively. Both schools have worked closely with Boxerwood to ensure all instruction gr. 3 through gr. 7 includes

SOL-integrated field programs. Last year, the middle school was particularly active as students planned river clean-ups, raised trout in their classroom, and hiked portions of the Appalachian Trail to monitor seasonal change. Both schools are also ramping up student-led recycling programs this year. “I am very proud to have our schools recognized for such an important honor,” commented Superintendent Dr. John Keeler, “We appreciate our association with Boxerwood and the impact they have had on our students gaining an appreciation for our local and global environments.”

Another long-time partner with Boxerwood, Lexington City Schools, also received recognition for both its elementary and middle school schools. “Despite relocation to the Lylburn Downing campus, Waddell still found a way to keep up its tradition of engaging 100% of its students in nature-based education last year,” explained Sheffield, “not an easy accomplishment when your school site is a collection of trailers in a ballfield.” Those commitments included pioneering a bluebird monitoring trail on campus (a Parks to Classroom project led by park ranger Pete Hamel) as well as sending students to Boxerwood for lessons that one teacher described as “superb, engaging, activities for all of our students in a setting of woodland beauty.” For second-grade educator Linda Bytnar, “these SOL-based lessons utilize the scientific method, written expression, songs, art, and puppets” in a way that energize and inspire her students.

With five recognized schools, Rockbridge County Schools is second only to Loudon County among divisions with the largest number of schools honored by Virginia Naturally. Central Elementary received its fourth year award and Mountain View its second while Natural Bridge, Fairfield, and Maury River Middle School all received first year awards. RCS is also the only division statewide, in addition to Lexington City, to have its entire elementary and middle school population attending schools with Virginia Naturally designation.

Like their counterparts in Lexington and Buena Vista, RCS students pace through a multi-year series of field-based investigations at Boxerwood and later, along local streams. Many are also involved with their teachers in additional follow-up opportunities back at school. With help from community partners, Central and Fairfield created new school gardens in the past year, while Mountain View, Maury River, as well as Central raised and released native trout through a pro bono partnership between Trout Unlimited and Boxerwood. In addition to coordinating an ongoing watershed investigation of Woods Creek involving all three middle school grades, MRMS teachers also facilitate field program utilizing the St. Mary’s Wilderness for advanced 8th graders.

One of the major goals of the Virginia Naturally program is to encourage schools to ramp up their environmental initiatives each year, and several schools are already off and running. Spurred on by its new designation, Natural Bridge Elementary is in its first month of implementing a new student-led recycling program; the school has also increasing the number of classrooms connecting with Boxerwood

this fall. "We are so excited to be named a Virginia Naturally School," reports principal Melanie Falls, "Our students and staff have worked very hard in collaboration with Boxerwood and our Master Gardeners' Program to create opportunities for students in environmental education. We look forward to enhancing our program in the years to come."

"It's definitely a community effort," commented Sheffield, noting the flourishing environmental scene in area schools arises from a long-standing partnership between schools, community partners, and local donors. "This is not Loudon County," she observed, noting a majority of the nine recognized schools serve low-income populations and thus need external help to fund their commitments. PTAs, W&L, businesses and civic clubs have all contributed to the effort, she noted. "When everyone pitches in, great things happen. That's something we can all feel very proud about."

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