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# Taking Science Outdoors

## Boxerwood Receives National Grant For Trail Blazers Project

Boxerwood was recently awarded a national grant from a new collaboration whose mission is to enhance STEM learning in after-school settings.

The grant comes from the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE), in partnership with the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), as supported by the U.S. Department of Education. The goal of this new collaboration is to promote opportunities for high-quality STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) in schools that serve low-income communities.

The 29 environmental education organizations awarded grants serve after-school programs in 17 states, from Alaska to Florida. All projects focus on promoting STEM through watershed education and action. Boxerwood's project was one of two in Virginia selected for funding. The two-year, \$80,000 award will underwrite new projects within after-school programs at Maury River Middle School, Natural Bridge Elementary

School, and Enderly Heights Elementary School.

Boxerwood's specific project, "Trail Blazers," proposes to introduce youth in science-informed conservation through outdoor recreation activities.

"Rockbridge is an incredibly beautiful county, but not all students have equal opportunity to explore and enjoy it," noted Elise Sheffield, Boxerwood education director. "We want to connect youth to hands-on science and stewardship through real-world fishing, paddling, and hiking. It just seemed like a natural fit. Equally important, it's a way we can encourage youth to become trail blazers for their own lives and for their communities."

Developed before the pandemic, Trail Blazers features both after-school and summer camp opportunities for the participating school partners, each of which run federally funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers. Funds support program development, transportation, supplies, admission to local parks, and even contracts with licensed kayak providers.

Sheffield acknowledged the pandemic upended some of the project's immediate plans and that, for now, implementation is on hold, pending guidance from partner schools.

"The good thing, however, is that this is a flexible two-year grant," she said. "If we can safely get kids outside this fall, we will. If we need to wait, we'll wait. Having this funding means we can help meet the schools in their need on the other side of this most uncertain time. Next summer and next year, kids will need to be outdoors, moving, playing, learning: and we'll be there. This amazing award makes that possible."

With no full-time educators on staff, Boxerwood was one of the smaller organizations selected for an award. Sheffield attributes the recognition to its extensive 20-year partnership with local schools and the many projects that have arisen in that collaboration.

"We're staying local, but the results get attention. In the last six months alone, Boxerwood has been invited



THE NEWLY FUNDED Trail Blazers project deepens youth connection to science and stewardship through outdoor recreation. When safe to do so, the new program at the middle school level will include after-school kayaking, an activity Boxerwood first piloted in summer 2017 with Maury River Middle School students in an after-school program, pictured here. Elementary students in Trail Blazers will do creek-side investigations and hiking as part of special week-long camps in summer 2021.

to share insights arising from this partnership with three national educational audiences: it's really pretty amazing."

"As we've shared with the superintendents," added Shef-

field, "each success creates conditions for the next success. Even in these extraordinarily difficult times, we are seeing the fruits of that collaboration. This grant helps

schools, and it helps students and right now it is helping keep Boxerwood afloat too. That's a rare bit of good news these days and for sure worth celebrating."