



Dr. Teri Staloch, Superintendent
Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools
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At Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools (PLSAS), E-STEM learning takes place year-round but spring is an extra-special time when the promise of growth and renewal that the season brings has us turning our attention even more to outdoor learning.

E-STEM stands for Environmental Education, Science, Technology, Engineering and Math. E-STEM is available to all students, even our youngest learners in pre-kindergarten classes. Circle of Friends Preschool and Early Childhood Family Education provide hands-on opportunities through exploratory play. Classes include E-STEM explorers, Pop-Up Nature Classes and our popular preschool nature school where the outdoors serve as the primary classroom.

Our early learners, along with elementary age students, hold E-STEM festivals either in the fall or spring. Both seasons provide ample opportunities for learning that often include studies with naturalists from Richardson Nature Center and Three Rivers Park to provide enriched learning for students. From studying birds, amphibians and reptiles, to seed dispersal, pond studies and soil erosion, the days are packed with new hands-on learning opportunities that are both educational and fun for students.

One of the tenets of E-STEM is teaching and learning that is focused on inquiry and real world problem-solving with projects and field experiences related to the environment. A recent example of this is a fifth grade project at La ola del lago at Grainwood where students have been studying erosion in Earth Science. Students got a unique opportunity to use Elwha River Stream Tables from the Science Museum of Minnesota. These tables allowed students to construct their own dam, then remove it and record their findings. This provided a fantastic hands-on lesson on erosion, sediment and human impact on the environment.

Next school year all fifth grade students will resume their field trip to Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center in Finland, MN. While the pandemic may have created a pause to this trip, teachers have still found ways to create fun and exciting learning opportunities here at home for students. McColl Pond Environmental Learning Center in Savage has served as a classroom to learn about birds, nature journaling and animal signs, while students also learned about cultural history at the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community Cultural Center, Hočokata Ti. Other activities include team-building games, rock climbing and a high-ropes adventure.

E-STEM learning also takes place through Community Education classes and there are student Environmental Education (EE) clubs in grades 3-12. Junior Naturalists make up our elementary EE club, while Earth Link is for middle schoolers. At the high school level, students can earn a varsity letter for their active participation in the EcoTeam club.

Our EE programs in particular caught the attention of the U.S. Department of Education who has recognized our district as one of the first ever Green Ribbon Schools Sustainability Districts in the nation for our energy efficient buildings, healthy students and school environment, and environmental literacy of all graduates. Edgewood, La ola del lago, Jeffers Pond, Five Hawks, Redtail Ridge and Glendale have all been named U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools.

E-STEM is here to stay. In fact our promise to our community is to integrate an E-STEM focus across the district as part of our Strategic Plan. Now as we look ahead to warmer days, you will see that focus in plain view as students complete the maple syrup harvesting season and begin planting school vegetable gardens. As we head into the final stretch of the school year, there is still ample opportunity to learn and grow. #WeArePLSASAllIn