



Dr. Teri Staloch, Superintendent
Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools
Prior Lake American/Savage Pacer
Column run date: December 8, 2018

The beginning of the fifth grade school year is one all students look forward to. It's their last year of elementary school and it's finally their turn to participate in the Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center experience near Finland, Minnesota.

At Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools we are nationally recognized and known for our district-wide Environmental Education (EE) curriculum. We believe engaging students in EE is important, which is why we have been sending all fifth grade students to Wolf Ridge for nearly 40 years.

During this week-long trip, students immerse themselves in outdoor learning with teachers, parent volunteers and Wolf Ridge staff. Each day students venture into a living laboratory of forests, lakes, rivers and hills where they learn about ecology, science, human culture, outdoor recreation, team-building, personal growth and more.

This approach to teaching and learning matches very closely to our district's E-STEM philosophy where students learn best through experience. Students spend almost the entire day outside where they trek the Superior Hiking Trail, see a variety of wildlife, experience food and farming at the Wolf Ridge farm and participate in the high ropes course, which is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that challenges both students and adults.

Students and adults learn to live and work together. They participate in kitchen and recycling duties and are encouraged to consider how their values and behaviors can influence and impact the world around them.

Five Hawks Elementary teacher Sandy Timmerman has coordinated the Wolf Ridge trip for our fifth graders for thirty years. She says students come back with a whole new perspective about Minnesota and the world they live in.

"Many of them will share experiences they had observing wildlife up close and personal," Timmerman says. "They talk about what it is like to be in a place with no other houses around, where deer walk by or graze a short distance away. They sit in the woods where chickadees are so comfortable they land on their head and hands. Students realize that they can live for five days without video games, TV, or any type of electronic, and most students don't miss them."

For many students, the Wolf Ridge trip represents their first time at a camp and away from their parents for an extended period of time. Both parents and teachers notice how much students grow from this experience.

“Back in the classroom, students and teachers have a greater bond because of this time together,” Timmerman says. “Students come back more independent and often connect their learning in the classroom to something they learned while at Wolf Ridge.”

This trip would not be possible without our dedicated parent volunteers, many of whom remember going to Wolf Ridge as a student and now want to experience this trip with their own children. In addition, Friends of Wolf Ridge donates \$20,000 in scholarships annually to ensure all students can take part in the phenomenal educational opportunity.

This year’s fifth grade classes have almost completed their trips to Wolf Ridge. When they return, they will continue EE in our beautiful outdoor classrooms, learning how to be critical thinkers and problem solvers.

I am grateful our students are able to participate in the Wolf Ridge experience where they gain a greater understanding about the world around them and discover something about themselves too. This is just one of the many examples of the way PLSAS staff members “educate all learners to reach their full potential as contributing and productive members of our ever-changing global community.”