

Results of Project Common Ground 1995-1999

Project Common Ground brings together students and teachers from urban and suburban classrooms for several daylong and overnight “encampments” over the course of a year. They meet at Wilder Forest, a center for community building and youth development near Marine-on-St. Croix, Minnesota.

The program uses experiential learning, or “learning while doing.” The activities focus on diversity in human society and in the natural world; learning to work as a team with diverse members; and developing the ability to think critically and probe more deeply into a subject.

In 1994, the superintendents of the Saint Paul and Stillwater schools and the president of the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation began exploring the possibility of providing an integrated learning experience for urban and suburban students. The State of Minnesota, seeking innovative approaches to desegregation of learning environments, provided seed money for the exploration and design of Project Common Ground.

In the first five years, more than 1,750 students from Saint Paul and Stillwater schools have



Students form small, diverse teams to work on outdoor learning projects.

participated in Project Common Ground encampments at Wilder Forest, according to program staff. (In 1995-96, students from Lake Elmo also participated.) The program has focused on grades 4-6, although students from grades 3-9 and 12 have participated in various ways in different years. Through outreach partnerships, Project Common Ground reaches additional students not included in these figures.

This summary describes the ways in which students, parents, and teachers said Project Common Ground made a noticeable difference.

Exposure to different cultures

The most important aspect of Project Common Ground, according to parents and staff, is the contact with people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. More than 8 out of 10 teachers rated Project Common Ground “very useful” in this area.

Before students arrive, they are assigned to teams that include both urban and suburban students. Team members get to know each other by working together on indoor and outdoor projects. For example, each team might go out into the forest, explore a different type of natural habitat, and bring back materials to use in an art project illustrating that habitat.

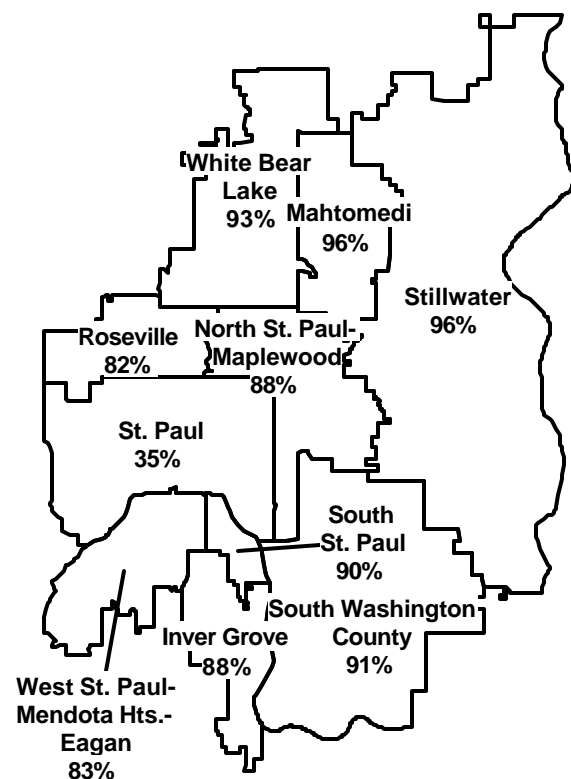
A fair amount of informal mingling also occurs. For example, in 1998-99, less than one-third (29%) of students said they spent most of their time with kids from their own school. Observers in 1995-96 noted that about half of the students sat next to at least one student not from their own school.

Sometimes further contact and friendships develop. In 1997-98, between one-third and one-half of the students said they had kept in touch

Students said ...

- It just showed me that the way you look isn't how you act. You can't tell just by looking at someone.
- I've been able to get along with people from different backgrounds, but it seems much easier since Common Ground.

Percentage of students who are white, by school district (1999-2000 school year)



Source: Minnesota Department of Children, Families & Learning.

with at least one friend from another school since the program ended.

Parents value the experiences that Project Common Ground provides for their children. In 1996-97, about half of parents reported that their children developed more interest in talking with and spending time with youth from other schools. They also felt that the program helped their children to become more outgoing and more interested in contact with others. Several suburban parents added that their children were less likely to be intimidated or fearful of others.

Cross-cultural understanding

Project Common Ground has shown positive results in promoting cross-cultural understanding. For instance, more than two-thirds of 1995-96 students said the program had helped them to get along with people from other cultural backgrounds. Students described this further by saying they developed an interest in knowing more about different people, discovering how “we are the same,” being careful to not make assumptions, and not being afraid of getting to know new people.

Most also said the program helped them to see how much they have in common with people who are different from themselves. In addition, they said the program has helped them to have more respect for others.

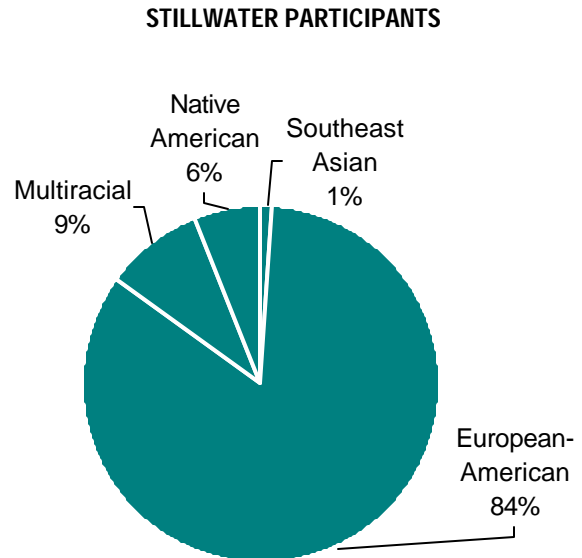
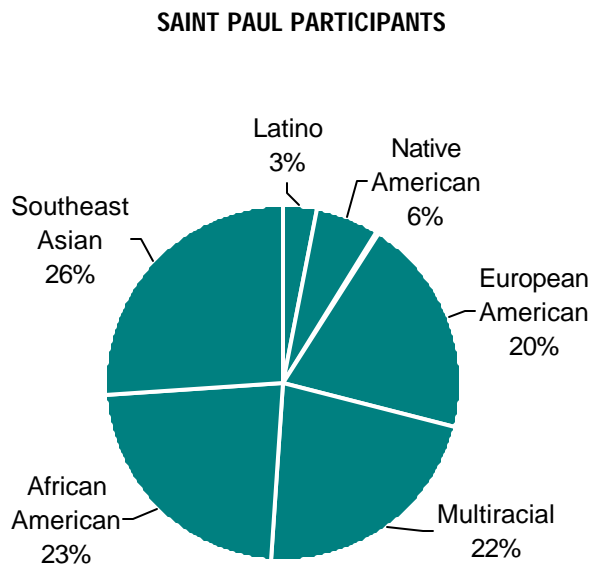
Working with others

In three years of youth surveys, about 80 percent of students said the program had influenced their views about working with others or had helped them work with others to get something done. Asked for more detail, students described this further by saying they found it easier to work with and communicate with others, to be more respectful of others, and to resist judging others so quickly.

About half of the parents reported a change in their child’s willingness to work with others and their ability to listen to others. They noticed improved listening skills, a greater ability to compromise and work out differences, and more openness toward hearing the other side of an issue.

CLASSROOM DIVERSITY

The urban classrooms that participated in Project Common Ground had much greater racial and ethnic diversity than the suburban classrooms.



Teachers and staff were almost unanimous in calling the program “very useful” for teaching cooperative learning and team-building skills. This was their highest rating for the effectiveness of any single aspect of Project Common Ground.

Inquiry skills

Project Common Ground encourages students to dig more deeply into information and ideas by asking questions such as: Why? So what? What does it mean to me? How might other people react to this?

In 1998-99, half to two-thirds of students said the program helped them to be more creative, to question things more, and to solve problems.

One-quarter of parents in 1995-96, and nearly half in 1997-98, mentioned that they had noticed their children were more open and inquisitive. In 1996-97, more than half of urban parents and more than one-third of suburban parents said they observed changes in their child’s ability to “think things through.”

In 1997-98, a large majority of teachers (86%) said the program was very useful in helping youth to develop skills related to inquiry learning.

Environmental and outdoor learning

Project Common Ground’s forest setting and its emphasis on “learning by experiencing” are important elements of the program. Teachers from urban schools found this particularly important for their students.

Parents said ...

- He’s more curious about getting to know people before he makes a judgment, and he’s more aggravated by people’s prejudiced remarks. ... The kids had an opportunity to learn things they couldn’t have in this community.
- I think she is more thoughtful and thinking of ways to solve problems.
- He started asking more questions about the weather - tornadoes and rain clouds, things like that. Just more questions about nature.
- He points out things when we walk, nature-wise.

Several parents in 1996-97 said their children showed greater interest in the natural environment after spending time at Wilder Forest.

A large majority of teachers and staff said Project Common Ground was “very useful” in helping students learn skills related to environmental subjects and ecology.

Benefits differ for urban and suburban schools

There are many indications that suburban youth made greater gains in cross-cultural understanding, while urban students gained more in inquiry skills and learning about nature. This may reflect in large part the fact that Saint Paul students had more prior experience with diversity (only 20% of Saint Paul students in

1998-99 were white), and less experience with natural habitats.

Among students and students of European descent reported the greatest changes in their attitudes toward other cultures. African American and multiracial students reported fewer gains. An African American researcher observing the program noted that African-American students had a particular interest in spending time with him. Introducing more ethnic diversity into the leadership of Project Common Ground (teachers, staff, and guest speakers) could be a valuable way to develop and model cross-cultural teamwork among adults as well as students.

Among teachers, however, the cross-cultural aspect had more impact among urban than suburban teachers. The greatest professional gain they reported was a greater understanding of the diverse group of students they teach on a day-to-day basis. Teachers from Stillwater, who tend to share a similar cultural background with most of their students, might not be expected to make great gains in understanding their own students.

What teachers gained

In 1997-98 and 1998-99, all teachers said they gained professionally from the program, and nearly all said they grew personally as well. Eight of 10 urban teachers said Project Common Ground had an impact on the way they teach, whereas only four of eight Stillwater teachers said it had this impact. The greatest gains

Learning by doing

If you went to Project Common Ground, you might ...

- Play "Human Bingo," a game that reinforces cooperation versus a winner-loser mindset.
- Reenact a historical experience like the Underground Railroad for escaped slaves, the 1862 uprising of the Dakota nation, the flight of Southeast Asian people after the Vietnam conflict, or the experiences of Irish people arriving at Ellis Island after the Great Famine of 1845.
- Interview students from other schools, then create Venn diagrams (overlapping circles) to show things that are shared in common and things that are unique.
- Take part in an art project where some people get fewer or poorer-quality materials to work with, yet all exercise their creativity to "design a better world."
- Study the diversity of habitats at Wilder Forest - native prairie, lakes, forest, farm.
- Gather eggs, see where honey is collected, gather firewood, and bake biscuits.
- Work with your team to track forest creatures in the snow, go ice fishing, or take a survival journey on cross-county skis or snowshoes.

reported by urban teachers were not in activities they developed or in their integration of Project Common Ground material into their own teaching (although both were reported), but in their understanding of the diverse group of students they teach. Most suburban teachers, on the other hand, may not have seen similar benefits because they share the same cultural background as most of their students. Some teachers reported using experiential learning more often in their own classrooms after having participated in Project Common Ground.

A common suggestion by teachers and staff was to expand the program, either in the number of youth it serves or the time youth spend at the program. Some also suggested providing the two classrooms with more contact during the year, in addition to the time spent at Wilder Forest.

Teachers said ...

- It's really helped me see a lot of my students in a different way.
- I saw skills in kids that do not come out in the classroom.
- It helped my understanding of what I can expect from them, how they learn, their learning styles.
- This program gives teachers a more realistic perspective of kids when you live with them and see them outside the classroom
- The experience reminds me to take the time and have the kids learn by hands-on activity.
- Helped me really see how education can take place outside of a school and to utilize resources beyond the purely academic to help children learn.

About this summary

Wilder Research Center and the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota have separately or cooperatively evaluated Project Common Ground during its five years of operation. This summary draws from all five evaluation reports.

For more copies of this summary or information about Project Common Ground, contact Beth Gross at the East Metropolitan Integration District 6067, 651-487-5450, extension 3118.

For details about the evaluation reports, contact Justine Nelson-Christinedaughter at Wilder Research Center, 651-647-4600, or the Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement at the University of Minnesota, 612-624-0300.

September 2000