

VAI Success Stories: Northview Field School

34

Hours of
PD

80

Hours of
Projects

7

Teachers

175

Students

Northview Field School Charts a New Course with Project-Based Learning

At Northview Field School, educators wanted to increase student engagement by connecting their classrooms with nature. By creating immersive outdoor learning environments with student-centered teaching practices, they felt they could help foster students' mastery of core subjects while encouraging curiosity, leadership, stewardship, community, growth, and adventure. Just as change is an ever-present part of nature, the school understood that to make this vision a reality, they would need to change some of their instructional practices; they would need to push themselves in areas of authentic learning. To that end, Northview Field School chose to partner with Van Andel Institute for Education (VAI), the makers of Blue Apple™ projects. In doing so, VAI helped Northview Field School plant the seeds for both a new kind of learning and a new kind of professional development.

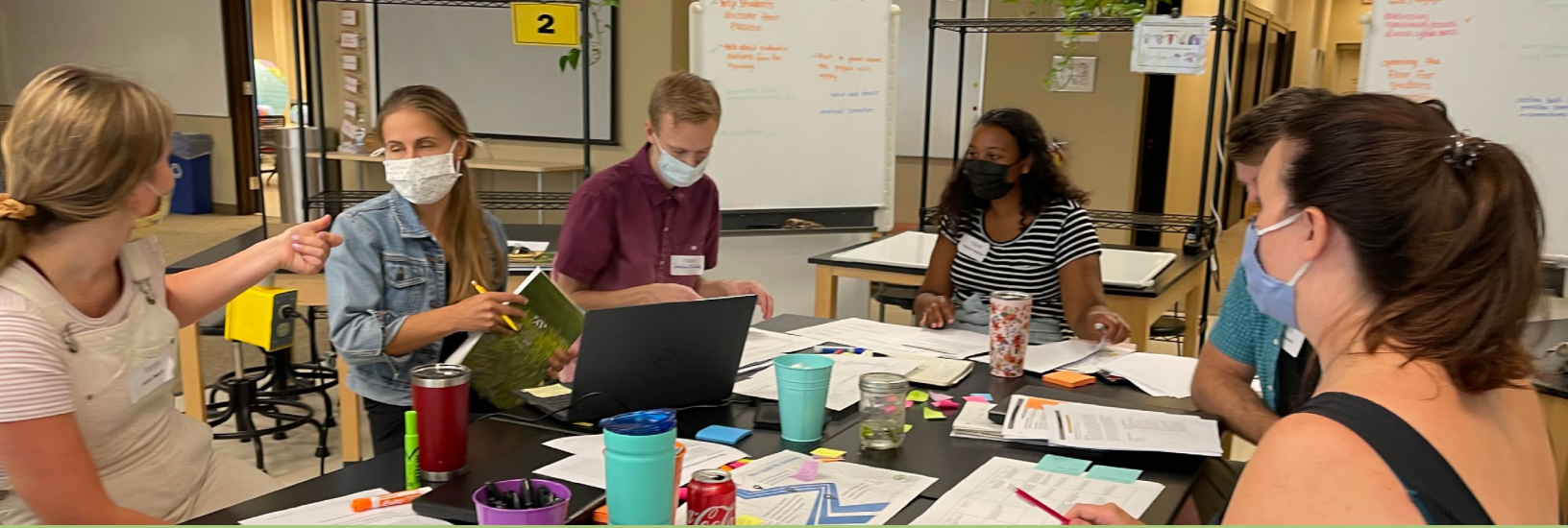
A New Adventure

Northview Field School began by crafting three specific goals to help identify and consolidate their overall mission:

1. To reorient their existing curriculum around project-based learning.
2. To create consistency across classrooms with instructional models and vocabulary.
3. To challenge themselves in areas of learning that went beyond classroom walls.

With these goals established, VAI worked to ensure Northview Field School teachers received the necessary tools and knowledge to make these goals a reality. First and foremost among these were project-based learning. Project-Based Learning, or PBL, incorporates academic content into real-world learning experiences. It teaches students that learning isn't something you do to pass a test—but something you apply practically when confronting modern problems.





To help familiarize Northview teachers with project-based learning, VAI provided teachers with the Blue Apple project, [*State of Sustainability*](#). In *State of Sustainability*, students explored the need for a sustainable world by focusing directly on their own state's sustainability practices. Kindergarten students created an [alphabet poster](#) and [video](#) while 1st–4th graders used their creativity to design a book about how Michigan engages in sustainable practices. Both assignments informed readers how small changes could develop a more environmentally friendly society. Once finished, students shared their work with friends and family to raise awareness for environmental issues. Given Northview Field School's nature-based curriculum, both teachers and students took to the project like fish to water!

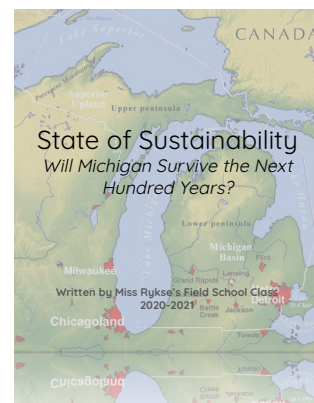
Rocky Roads

By implementing [*State of Sustainability*](#) in five different classrooms at the same time, Northview Field School quickly gained momentum on their first two goals. Teachers were supported along the way by one of VAI's Project Coaches, Jamie MacPherson, who showed them how to customize their projects to suit their classroom needs.

"Having the opportunity to work so closely with these teachers has given me insight into what their individual needs are and has allowed me to tailor all of our interactions and resources accordingly," recalled MacPherson while reflecting on her time with Northview. "The work that they are doing is truly transformational, and it is inspiring to see all of the good they are putting out into the world through these projects."

The Blue Apple project inspired teachers to collaborate and communicate more efficiently while tailoring their instruction to different grade levels. It also served to unite their students around a common cause — the promotion of sustainable environments.

However, like many districts, Northview Field School found its 2020 school year upended by the presence of COVID-19. The pandemic presented numerous challenges to their initial goals and was a constant shadow on the educational landscape. Thankfully, Northview's outdoor learning environments proved an unforeseen boon in navigating the pandemic. The open-air environments meant that teachers were able to educate students in-person all year and minimize the educational disruption (though school days were shortened as a safety measure).



[*Miss Rykse's Field School Class Report on the State of Sustainability*](#)

"The students were so proud when their State of Sustainability book got published. Many kids felt like true authors. Our youngest learners made an Earth Care Alphabet poster to share with their family and other members of the community. The kids really felt like they made a difference by sharing what they learned about sustainability."

— Jenna Rykse,
1st & 2nd Grade Teacher



Meeting the Challenge

Despite the setbacks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the teachers at Northview were able to achieve their learning goals and, in many ways, exceed them. Implementing a Blue Apple project across classrooms allowed Northview Field School to center their curriculum around project-based learning while also coordinating their instruction models and vocabulary. The experience also taught educators how to develop their own projects and personalize them for maximum efficiency. Finally, while COVID presented itself as a sizable obstacle, VAI's resources allowed Northview Field School to continue prioritizing authentic learning, moving beyond the classroom and finding support in their local community.

The knowledge and skills Northview Field School teachers acquired through this partnership have proven invaluable, and they are eager to put them into practice. Students were excited to return from the summer and discover new ways they can be a positive influence on their surroundings. Meanwhile, VAI is honored to have played a small part in their journey by supporting teachers with training, resources, and ongoing assistance. VAI's comprehensive and practical approach to PD is helping Northview Field School teachers prioritize their time while giving them a voice in identifying their needs. VAI believes schools and educators deserve more than drop-off supplies; they deserve a commitment to their long-term vision.

It's all a reassuring reminder of where the learning journey can take us when we're willing to use our schools not as factories we move students through, but as innovative pillars of society, where students apply learning to real-world problems. With deep roots and a strong resolve, Northview Field School is growing confidently into the future.

The Journey Ahead

The story of Northview Field School is far from over. Even now, its teachers are implementing the Blue Apple framework to create new projects that are memorable, meaningful, and fun. Learning Specialists from VAI continue to provide resources to assist teachers and work tirelessly to pinpoint the biggest needs within the classroom, setting up Northview Field School teachers for success. Best of all, the students are engaged, excited, and ready to learn. This mutual support and cooperation are how Northview Field School continues to overcome the most demanding of obstacles, and foster classrooms where curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking thrive!



Hear What They Had to Say!

"The format of the Blue Apple projects, their setup and presentation of everything, not to mention the resources that were available, were really seamless. They were great to pull from and adapt to my own passions. At the same time, the Blue Apple framework could be applied to my own teaching outside the projects as well."

— Matt Fenech,
3rd & 4th Grade Teacher

"VAI is a great organization to work with, very teacher centered and striving to support educators in our local community. Everyone walks away from a training with something they can go back and use in their classroom the next day."

— Jenna Rykse,
1st & 2nd Grade Teacher

"Having the opportunity to work so closely with these teachers has given me insight into what their individual needs are and has allowed me to tailor all of our interactions and resources accordingly. The work that they are doing is truly transformational, and it is inspiring to see all of the good they are putting out into the world through these projects."

— Jamie MacPherson
Learning Solution Specialist,
Van Andel Institute for Education



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creativity, and critical thinking thrive.

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