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Outdoor classroom created at Eden Prairie's Cedar Ridge Elementary

By Patty Dexter | pdexter@swpub.com Sep 1, 2016



Cedar Ridge Elementary's new outdoor classroom will be able to seat around 130 students, so an entire grade can meet here at once, according to Katie Cole, president of the Cedar Ridge Elementary PTO.

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Photo by Patty Dexter

"The outdoor classroom will be an amazing resource used to connect the different academic content with an environmental backdrop."

That's how Cedar Ridge Elementary Principal Jodi Markworth described a new outdoor classroom, known as Eagles' Nest, that's been created in the wooded area behind the school through the efforts of the school's PTO and other community partners. The school is excited to

partner with an environmental educator and other community organizations to enhance learning for students and she is appreciative of the PTO's support in the project, she added.

"I see it being used in a variety of ways for teaching science, using it as a thinking arena as students are working on creative writing projects... There are no limits on how this could be expanded as we are working to incorporate authentic learning experiences for our students," Markworth said.

The project has been more than a year in the making and has involved the PTO, parent volunteers, two Eden Prairie High School students working on their Eagle Scout projects, Hennepin County Master Gardeners, Eden Prairie School District staff and the city of Eden Prairie, according to Cedar Ridge PTO President Katie Cole and PTO Vice President Vanessa Nordstrom.

"There are so many people in the community that are helping make it a reality," Cole said.

The school planned to host an open house on Aug. 31 and feature the outdoor classroom to the broader school community. The PTO is hoping to have an official ribbon cutting for the project at a later date, Cole said.

'THE SKY'S THE LIMIT'

According to Cole, the vision for the project came from last year's PTO Board and former Principal Ann Swanson, who supported opportunities for students to spend more time outdoors. In spring 2015, they discussed ideas to get kids outside and thought about creating a classroom that could fit an entire grade. They began planning and fundraising for the project in fall 2015.

"For me it was like getting ... outside is just healthy for their minds and body," she said.

Cole said the PTO has spent about \$30,000 on the project for construction, landscaping and other expenses. The project is being supported by funds raised through a "legacy wall" at the beginning of the path leading to the outdoor classroom; money raised from box top donations, and a parents' night out event and silent auction at Brunswick Zone XL in April. For the legacy wall, families and community members had the option of purchasing a stone for \$75, \$125 or \$250. Jim Merchant of Nelson Masonry built the wall and Brian Rosen of Stone and Steel Design engraved the names on the stones.

The PTO is also spending about \$1,000 per grade this school year to hire naturalist Larry Wade and the Three Rivers Park District to provide training for teachers on how to use the outdoor space to teach their science standards. They have coordinated with Associate Principal Nancy Benz on that process, Cole said.

"This could be an ongoing thing for years," Cole said. "We have a great foundation and now the sky's the limit, what these teachers come up with."

The PTO had a family work weekend in May to help clear the space for the outdoor classroom, Cole said. Nordstrom said more than 40 volunteers participated.

The PTO awarded the project bid to Beds & Borders for the design, construction and landscaping work. The result was three levels of amphitheater style stone seating shaped in a half circle. The location will be able to seat about 130 students, so an entire grade can be there at once, Cole said.

"The only thing they did not do was the legacy wall and the mulching," she said of Beds & Borders. The mulch was donated by the city of Eden Prairie and the district's transportation and grounds department delivered the mulch to the site and helped spread it.

Nordstrom said she reached out to the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum and they connected her with Hennepin County Master Gardeners Mary Dalsin and Greg Towne, who will help with identification of existing plants in the area, provide signage and give recommendations on what could be planted around the classroom.

EPHS students and Boy Scouts Sam Ruhlin and Benjamin MacGibbon are building other features that will add to how the outdoor classroom can be used, Nordstrom said. Ruhlin and MacGibbon both attended Cedar Ridge.

Ruhlin's project is building a structure that will hold a whiteboard at the front of the outdoor classroom. He expected it to be completed in time for the start of school.

"It will have two posts running up the outside of the structure, with the actual whiteboard between those and a roof on top of it all. There will also be doors to help protect the whiteboard from the elements," he explained. "I heard about the outdoor classroom project

through word of mouth, and contacted the Cedar Ridge PTO asking if there was any help that they might need with it. They responded by saying that this project would be something they would need for the classroom's completion, and I then began planning it."

MacGibbon said he heard about the outdoor classroom from Ruhlin and was interested in helping too. He's constructing four wooden activity/exploration tables for all grades to use for a variety of subjects. They will be permanently installed with lids on them so they can be used all year for games, activities, hands-on exploration of materials or other purposes. He planned to have one table finished by Aug. 31 and the others installed and completed before the ground freezes.

"I think these tables will be a great asset to the outdoor classroom by offering a variety of uses and activities for the teachers and students," he said. "They will also be made for simple and easy clean up and storage. By building them out of wood, they will also fit in with the atmosphere of the outdoor classroom look and feel."

Nordstrom believes the new classroom will allow students to use their imagination and be a place where they can become more centered as they learn.

"I think it's just going to create a whole different perspective for these kids," she said.

Eden Prairie School District by the numbers

Eden Prairie School District students will return to school on Tuesday, Sept. 6. This year in the district there are:

- 8,810 students (projected K-12 enrollment in the 2016-17 budget)
- 661 teachers
- 284 paraprofessionals
- 62 new teachers
- 1,851,588 square feet of district building space

Source: Eden Prairie School District

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Reporter

