

# Taking the Classroom to the Forest: A School's Forest Fridays Program

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## Into The Woods



Boot clad and bundled, seventeen kindergartners shuffle out of the heavy school doors. As they emerge, each breath suddenly becomes visible mixing with the cold, penetrating air. Standing poised at the door, one student, the “door holder,” waits until his or her last classmate has emerged. The students move confidently behind their teacher, Eliza Minnucci,

who strides purposefully towards the nearby trail system, a mere 20 yards from the school doors. Today is Friday, Forest Friday.

Every Friday for the past nine months, Minnucci and her students have left the walls of the Ottauqueechee Public School in Quechee, Vermont behind and ventured into the woods, rain or shine, frigid or buggy. Each child is responsible for dressing themselves and making sure that their backpacks contain a lunch, water, and extra layers. They will be outside for nearly their entire school day and need to be prepared for whatever they may encounter. This unpredictability that exists in the outdoors was one of the driving factors in Minnucci’s decision to start a Forest Kindergarten program.

*“We took to the woods in a big part because the environment is so much less controlled than the classroom,”* reflects Minnucci. *“I wanted to expose my students to a complex environment in which a huge spectrum of thought, wonder, and learning were all available at once. During Forest Fridays, there is so much navigation, risk-taking, and personal responsibility involved in each day, and it’s always changing.”*

## The Changing Landscape of Kindergarten

As academic expectations in public elementary schools become more demanding, some educators have turned to the outdoors as a means of providing meaningful, relevant, and tangible experiences for their students. The Forest Kindergarten movement, which has taken hold in Europe over the past 30 years, takes a very different approach towards early childhood education. Instead of focusing on developing early literacy and numeracy skills, nature preschool and forest kindergarten educators aspire to developing social competence, individual resilience and a readiness to learn in young children. Their conviction is that this real world experience will provide the confidence, resilience and perseverance that are the foundation for increased motivation and improved academic performance.



In modern day parlance this is what Angela Duckworth and other educational psychologists are calling “grit.” It’s grit or stick-to-it-ive-ness that appears to be one of the major determinants of school success.

Have you seen the videos of the marshmallow research with four year olds? Put a four year old in a room with a marshmallow and tell her that if she can resist eating the marshmallow for 15 minutes, then when the teacher comes back, she can have two marshmallows. The majority of 4 year olds can’t resist—they often pop the marshmallow in their mouths as soon as the adult leaves the room. About a 1/3 however, figure out ways to delay gratification and get rewarded with an additional marshmallow. Longitudinal studies then determined that those children that delay gratification wind up being more successful in school, have higher SAT scores and lower body mass indices and are better off in a variety of ways. In other words, students that have the capacity to persist towards goals in face of obstacles and challenge tend to be more successful. It’s this “grittiness” that Eliza Minucci and her Forest Friday counterpart Meghan Teachout hope to develop with the Forest Fridays program.

## Developing Grittiness and Meeting the Common Core Standards

For Minnucci and Teachout's students, each Friday starts in the classroom. As students filter into the room, they can choose from one of two options, Forest Plan or Field Guides. A Forest Plan asks students to identify what they would like to do in the woods that day. These plans detail anything from imaginative play scripts they intend to enact to drawings of local flora and fauna the students hope to see. Each plan is unique and the creator is happy to describe what he or she wants to pursue in the woods that day.

Students who opt for Field Guides can be found sitting with Teachout, perusing New England-focused field guides that have in-depth descriptions and images of local species. *Naturally Curious*, by Hartland, Vermont-based author Mary Holland, is a favorite resource of these students. They excitedly flip through this 474-page book and make connections to experiences they've had outdoors or even to texts they've been exposed to in the classroom.

Kindergarten literacy standards are much more demanding than they were ten years ago. Just within the *Reading Informational Texts* section of the Common Core State Standards, there are ten individual standards that students are expected to meet before the end of the Kindergarten year. These expectations range anywhere from:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.R1.K.1—With prompting and support, (children) ask and answer questions about key details in a text,

to:

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.R1.K.10 —(Children) Actively engage in group reading activities with purpose and understanding.



Because the students have become enthralled with being in the woods and figuring out what they're finding, they are compelled to engage with non-fiction texts (field guides) to answer their questions. They are reading with "purpose and understanding."

*"Prior to Forest Fridays, finding the right non-fiction*

*texts that were engaging and meaningful to my students was daunting,"* reflects Minnucci. *"Forest Fridays provided real-life connections and inspiration for these*



*students to engage with non-fiction texts. I recently spent a considerable percentage of my classroom budget on more non-fiction books and pamphlets that provide information about the flora and fauna in our woods because of my students' intense interest."*

When the tone of Minnucci's bell resonates throughout the classroom, the students spring into action. Forest Plans are deposited in the appropriate folder and field guides are either returned to the bookshelf or added to a pile of materials that will accompany the group outside. The students move to their cubbies and begin to dress themselves for the day's weather. As coats are zipped and mittens are tucked into sleeves, the group gathers one last time so the teachers can insure that everyone has the essential items. As Minnucci flips the light switch and the room fades into darkness, the group becomes quiet, attentive for any final instructions.

## Happy Trails

Depending on the weather and trail conditions, it can take the group anywhere from ten to twenty minutes to trek to their Forest Kindergarten classroom. As they hike, the group follows white paw prints that have been painted on trees to guide the way. They step over logs, walk on uneven ground, cross streams, and climb uphill until they've reached their destination. When it's cold and icy, the steep trail demands a lot of attention and persistence. This is grit in the making.



In this forested classroom without walls, Minnucci and her students have used the natural materials at hand to create a home away from home. Against a rock wall sits a student-constructed shelter where the group can sit on dry ground in any weather. A fire ring is encircled with wooden benches, made from fallen logs. Above the fire ring a chain dangles from a wooden tripod, where the

group hangs a cast iron pot. Behind a wall of vertically placed limbs resides a portable latrine where human waste is collected and then disposed of indoors, rather than introduced into this natural environment. And finally, a thermometer and rain collector await the group as a means of measuring the day's

temperature and precipitation. Yet, before activities begin, the students gravitate to their previously selected sit spots.

*“We have a set routine to have quiet sit spots when we first get to the woods,”* reflects Minnucci. *“Sit spots are a must-do and have developed into a time of independent building and observation.”*

Following a few minutes of independent silence, the group gathers around a fire the teachers have started while the students were at their sit spots. Here they conduct their morning meeting.

*“We have our greeting which typically asks each child in turn to notice what’s different in the forest since last week,”* says Minnucci. *“Then we check the temperature on our thermometer, discuss the weather a bit, and have a snack. Then it’s free play time.”*

Throughout the remainder of the day Minnucci and Teachout offer project-based “excursions”. These experiences include tracking, scat identification, tapping and collecting sap from nearby maple trees, building an igloo, creating luge runs for different size balls to measure motion, and finding “math treasures” (baggies with unanswered math equations and blocks to do the math) left by another kindergarten class. Through offering these opportunities as “excursions” rather than requirements, the teachers have found student investment and engagement to be more genuinely student driven.

### **Why The Woods?**

Minnucci and Teachout face the same pressures as any kindergarten teachers. In fact, with the implementation of this program, as well as increasing demands from Common Core State Standards, they are under even more scrutiny to demonstrate why the woods are beneficial to the children in their class. What it comes down to is that there are certain experiences that cannot be created in a classroom and they would be doing a disservice to their students to not explore those avenues.

As Minnucci reflects upon the past nine months, many of her thoughts gravitate not towards academia but rather to the students who make up her class.

*“The opportunity for teamwork and the necessity for solving problems independently is not replicable in the close, controlled classroom setting,”* she expresses. *“I am happy for the ways the outdoor spaces have increased engagement of some students who struggle more with the academic environment that is the current state of public kindergarten..... The outdoors provides the opportunity for some kids to be experts in a way that they aren’t in the classroom and is very supportive of academic goals, because their*

*confidence outdoors translates into effort indoors.”* Both teachers have discovered that using both indoor **and** outdoor classrooms better serves them as educators because it provides a multitude of avenues in which they can facilitate learning experiences.

### **Putting the Vermont Back into Little Vermonters**



There's something more going on here as well. As the requirements for kindergartners have increased, the opportunities for children to engage with the landscape have decreased. Young children spend eight hours a day engaged with digital media

(television, iPhones, computers, X-box) and 30 minutes a day outside. It's like fast food America—the MacDonald's burger in White River Junction, Vermont is exactly the same as it is in Wichita, Kansas. The uniqueness of a Vermont childhood is being lost. Making mudpies, shaping luge paths, tracking animals and boiling down sap are evaporating from Vermont children's lives. Take a typical Vermont childhood as described by Ida Clee Bemis born in East Calais, Vermont in 1878. In her recollections she describes a favorite spring activity.

*“Another favorite pastime was mud cake making. We each had our mud cake house in the wood shed. We prepared regular meals using different kinds of leaves for beefsteak and pork chops, frost our cakes with sawdust. How we treasure the handleless cups and pitchers and cracked plates we collected from all the neighbors!”*

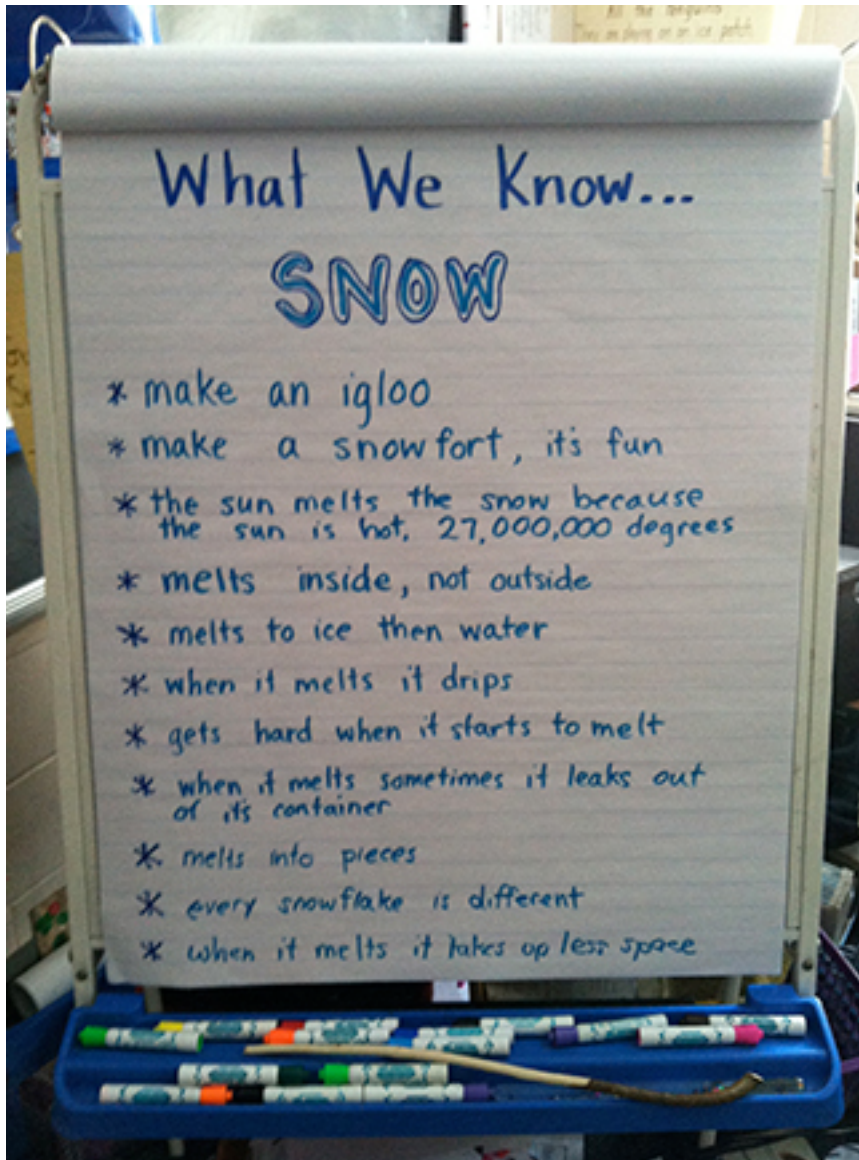
And in the winter,

*“Our favorite sport was coasting. The skating season was short as it usually snowed as soon as the mill pond froze over. We made the most of it while it lasted, the boys building a fire on the island so we could get warm. But coasting was something else again. We coasted from the day of the first snow until spring. Our favorite place was the road up the East Hill. We started almost up to the cemetery and coasted down to the church in the village, a good quarter*

of a mile.”

These adventures in the landscape should be a Vermont child’s birthright, something every children deserves to experience. They’re activities that craft the unique hearty character of a Vermonter—the ability to live by your wits, the toughness to endure cold and hardship, the ingenuity to improvise and do more with less. Yet, in the past few decades fewer and fewer children have been experiencing this birthright. Programs like Forest Fridays revive these opportunities and insure the grittiness of future Vermonters.

### The Principal Speaks For The Woods



Minnucci and Teachout may be the face of the Ottauquechee School’s Forest Kindergarten program but they are both quick to acknowledge the support they have received from the school’s principal, Amos Kornfeld. In fact, Kornfeld was the catalyst for the idea of a Forest Kindergarten.

An acquaintance of Kornfeld’s passed along a documentary called *School’s Out: Lessons From A Forest Kindergarten*, that follows group of children who go to a Swiss kindergarten in the forest every

day, rain or shine, snow or sleet. Kornfeld showed his staff the documentary. In attendance was Eliza Minnucci, and the rest you already know.



On Fridays, Kornfeld typically makes the trek up to the outdoor classroom. He enjoys seeing what the children are engaged in, as well as having conversations with them about what they are doing.

*“They have become comfortable outside, have been able to take responsibility, and have been able to demonstrate lots of creativity and innovation,”* Kornfeld shares. *“I’ve seen all sorts of foundational skills develop like cooperating, taking turns, counting, sorting, reflection, and things that they clearly could be doing in the classroom as well, but now they’re having to develop a certain amount of resilience, especially if it’s cold or wet.”*

As these children wrap up their kindergarten school year, Kornfeld hopes the students’ outdoor verve confidence will lead to an appreciation of the natural resources they have in their community. He is also hopeful that the Kindergarten successes will encourage other teachers to take advantage of what the outdoors has to offer. He is quick to acknowledge that in order for outdoor teaching to become a regular classroom routine, it would require careful scaffolding from the teacher to meet whatever learning goals are being pursued. One huge advantage that he sees is that the innate interest in children is already there.

*“If you ever talk to kids about getting out, the vast majority of kids in any grade would want to be out there more,”* he mentions. *“I’m even talking about older kids. When I talk to the older kids they’re sort of envious, they wish they had that opportunity.”*



### **Parents Speak For The Woods**

Parental support of the Forest Friday program has been an integral part the program’s success. For students to succeed in the woods, they need to come to school well fed, rested, and prepared. And because the

teachers have communicated candidly and clearly with parents, the Forest Friday program has been incredibly well received.

*“Forest Fridays have had a profoundly positive impact on my son’s life,”*



one parent expressed. *“There are many days, especially now that spring has arrived, where he will get out of the car or off the bus and never make it inside of the house. He will go straight to one of his outdoor projects. His time in the forest has contributed to his innate love of nature and being outside and I think this has helped to boost his confidence. I feel like it [Forest Friday] was a program that was designed specifically for my child.”*

Another parent commented, *“This program is probably the best educational thing that could have ever happened to my child. He receives all of the standard kindergarten education, but it is greatly enhanced by all of his experiences both in the woods and in the preparation for and discussion of their time outdoors.”*

*“When we go on hikes now as a family, he will point out the deer scat or tell us facts like how beech trees get their buds before any other tree,”* shared another parent. *“This year our family tried sugaring for the first time and he knew every part of the process and practically taught his Dad how to do it!”*

*“We have noticed that she has become increasingly more responsible at home and is taking it upon herself to do jobs that will help out. She is more confident in knowing she can take initiative to help instead of waiting to be asked to do something. I really, really wish the school would consider adding forest curriculum to upper grades,”* one parent suggested. *“I think that it would be great if all kids in the school could spend one-half to one day per week outside. This might provide an opportunity for kids in different grades to work together on projects out in the forest.”*

### **Work Hard, Play Hard**



And what do the kids say?

*“I learned about hurting friends and how to make them feel better.”*

*“I learned that you stay away from fire!”*

*“I learned how to be in a forest and be safe out there.”*

*“I learned not to destroy nature because animals need it to eat.”*

*“I learned all sorts of stuff, like what creatures and plants are out there.”*

Isn't it interesting that the children focus on skills and experiences rather than content? And, though they show it but don't necessarily say it, they've become tougher and grittier. Forest Fridays are not easy. Often it 's cold, wet, windy, snowy, rainy, sweaty, or all of the above. Yet, these students don't seem to mind. In fact, every so often you'll hear a student say the phrase, **“work hard, play hard.”**

Early in the year, Minnucci read one of Dr. Seuss' earliest stories, *The King's Stilts*, to the students. In the book, King Birtram works very hard, up early every morning to ensure his kingdom is running smoothly. But, at five o'clock each evening, his workday ends and it is time for him to play. For Birtram, this means racing around his kingdom on a pair of red stilts. As the class read through *The King's Stilts* they composed a wall chart of ways in which they also worked hard and played hard in the classroom. This table hangs on their classroom wall as a reminder of why both are important.

As academic expectations in public elementary schools become more demanding, teachers like Eliza Minnucci and Meghan Teachout are not changing what they teach but rather how and where teach. They are teaching through exposing students to real situations with real consequences, where mistakes are not speed bumps or roadblocks but rather opportunities for rich learning. They are teaching in environments that are constantly changing and exposing students to new challenges around each bend. Through these experiences students are learning lifelong lessons as they build confidence, develop resilience, and gain perseverance. They are all starting to understand the healthiness of balancing working hard and playing hard.

For more on Minnucci and Teachout's Forest Kindergarten, please visit:  
<http://mrsminnucci.wordpress.com/>.



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