

WEBINAR SERIES ON INNOVATIONS IN ILLINOIS CHARTER SCHOOLS



Prairie Crossing Charter School - Outside the Four Walls: Engaging Students through Environmental Learning May 5, 2021

Prairie Crossing Charter School, founded in 1999, serves students in kindergarten through eighth grade. The school uses the outdoor environment as a classroom for place-based learning. Students work in teams, apply critical thinking, and engage in hands-on activities to study and solve real-world challenges. Prairie Crossing teachers create vertically aligned learning experiences in which students address multiple learning standards: science (e.g., Earth systems, biology, energy), English Language arts (e.g., research skills, science communication), social science (e.g., inquiry, civics, economics, financial literacy), and math (e.g., measurement, data analysis). The campus includes the first LEED Certified school building in Illinois, outdoor classrooms, and a sustainable schoolyard.

Environmental and Place-Based Education

The [Illinois Learning Standards](#) include a theme of instruction, “Earth and Human Activity,” that begins with kindergarten and continues through high school. Standards cover a broad variety of topics, including the sustainable use of natural resources, alternative energy, and human impact on climate change. This strand was included in one of the Illinois [Priority Standards](#) because of its potential for deep student engagement.

Environmental Education (EE) and Place-based Education (PBE) are two ways to engage with these standards. EE engages students in learning about environmental issues and developing attitudes and skills to take action to improve the environment and make informed and responsible choices. [PBE extends EE](#) by rooting learners in their communities and local environments through learner-centered, interdisciplinary, inquiry-based [learning experiences, that connect student with their communities and the environment](#). PBE and EE support deep, engaged learning across the curriculum, emphasizing relevance and student action and responsibility. The Great Lakes Stewardship Initiative has posted a set of [case studies about place-based education](#) that describe the context, process, and outcomes of projects conducted in a variety of communities.

Outcomes of Place-based Environmental Education

[Research provides strong evidence of the impact of EE](#) and PBE on [improving student learning](#), teacher and student engagement, and school culture and community partnerships. These methods of instruction had an [overwhelmingly positive influence](#) on K-12 students’ knowledge, attitudes, skills, and civic engagement.

Resources for Place-Based (PBE) and Environmental Education (EE)

[Green Schools National Network](#) - strategies to foster healthy, sustainable K-12 schools and accelerate achievement through green, healthy, and sustainable practices. [GreenPrint® for Green, Healthy, and Sustainable Schools](#).

[The Center for Green Schools](#) - resources, learning networks, and tools about sustainability and learning through community action.

[Chicago Environmental Educators](#) - network for Chicago educators who teach environmental science topics in formal or informal settings (public, private, alternative, charter, university).

[North American Association for Environmental Education](#) – network of educators and institutions who deliver environmental education supporting professional development, harnessing collective impact, and championing environmental education. The organization has an [Illinois affiliate](#).

Illinois Environmental Protection Agency – [Environmental Education Resources](#)

[Promise of Place](#) – resources and information

