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UMaine Today



UMaine 4-H Centers partner with Maine K-12 schools to provide outdoor and STEM education for students

September 3, 2020

University of Maine Cooperative Extension's 4-H Learning Centers will play a pivotal role in the education plans of K-12 schools in Maine communities this fall by providing venues for vibrant outdoor learning, and experiential STEM and outdoor education lessons that add depth to standard grade-level curriculum.

"Outdoor learning centers are playing a significant role in the reopening of schools across the country," says Ryder Scott, state director of UMaine Extension 4-H Camps and Learning Centers. "With strong community relationships, program-ready facilities and talented education staff, the UMaine 4-H Centers are rapidly becoming leaders in partnerships between outdoor learning centers and public school districts in Maine."

One such partnership is between UMaine's Blueberry Cove 4-H Center and the St. George Municipal School Unit (MSU). The K-8 school serving the peninsula community reached out to Blueberry Cove 4-H Center director Ryan LeShane near the end of the last school year to explore opportunities to expand outdoor educational opportunities for middle school students using the experiential STEM resources of the 4-H Center.

This year, all St. George MSU sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders will spend their school day at Blueberry Cove on a rotating basis, for the entire school year. Students will engage in outdoor, field-based science with support from UMaine professionals. In addition, the 4-H Center will provide the technology necessary for those students to participate in educational opportunities that will connect them with expert educators, including UMaine faculty in various disciplines.

Up the coast at UMaine's Tanglewood 4-H Center in Lincolnville, Cooperative Extension staff are working with the Captain Albert W. Stevens School (CASS) in Belfast to build upon an existing, grant-funded STEM mentorship program called 4-H Tech Wizards. With funding from the U.S. Department of Justice, the UMaine 4-H Centers provide experiential STEM education that helps engage students and creates strong relationships with caring adults.

"This is an exciting time for outdoor learning," says CASS principal Glen Widmer. "We've been making a concerted effort over the past few years to increase our outdoor programming. If there is a silver (green?) lining to our current situation, it is the increased interest on the part of both the families and the teachers to get outside more and connect the curriculum to the out of doors. We are most grateful for our partnership with Tanglewood, as it is the vehicle that drives the process," says CASS principal Glen Widmer.

In Oxford County at UMaine's 4-H Center at Bryant Pond, Extension staff are preparing for a busy fall, partnering closely with several western Maine districts. In particular, in MSAD 17, principals have the option to bring students to the 4-H Center for outdoor learning, allowing the schools to space students out and giving them an opportunity to experience all the facility has to offer.

In addition, for the sixth consecutive year, the Bryant Pond 4-H Center and SAD 44 are working together to host the Telstar Freshman Academy, an interdisciplinary, project-based learning program for the ninth grade from Telstar High School. All Telstar ninth-graders spend a portion of their school day at the 4-H Center, where a team of teachers works with them on project-based units that meet standards in English language arts, science and social studies.

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