

This is Why...

For the past 24 years, I have taught third and fourth grade students. My main focus has been to help each child to formulate questions about the world they live in, to introduce resources, teach research skills, and inspire students to keep their questioning minds, so they will maintain the desire to find answers and solutions to questions and problems as they arise. It is my quest to help them reach their highest academic potential. I have found the integration of place-based education essential to my teaching pedagogy.

I have always begun our unit on our watershed with the question, "What is a watershed?" A repeated, predictable answer is, "A watershed is a shed that holds water." When we go on to explore the nature of water, its properties, uses, and importance, a world of questions invariably follows. My students are hooked from the get go!

As we explore the story and map, *The Watershed Journey*, students are fascinated by the history of this place which they call home. Their growing connection to the place where they live comes alive. It is amazing to observe the way they formulate a new view of how they can be a part of protecting the watershed and all of its inhabitants. They see themselves as an important part of the community and develop a commitment to protect the land that they once may have taken for granted.

This place-based unit differs from conventional text and classroom-based education in that it understands students' local community as one of the primary resources for learning. It is rooted in what is local; the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature and art of where we live. Right before my eyes they become stewards of their environment. Learning becomes much more than just words on a page. It is water moving around their bodies. It is animals they see and touch each day. It is the sound of the rustling leaves while taking a nature walk. It is all of these sensory dimensions in the world they are a part of.

As they help collect aquatic insects from a cold healthy stream, identify them under a microscope, learn about native species, and about species that have been introduced by man causing unexpected changes in the environment, they become aware, hopeful, and find purpose in understanding at a much deeper level. They learn to take care of the world by understanding where they live and by taking action in their own backyards.

You ask me why? The benefits for my students have been enormous and ongoing. They leave

with a sense of place, and their place in it. They become a part of something with a rich and meaningful history, and purposeful in maintaining it for the future.

... I have passionately supported the Flathead Lakers' 'Becoming Watershed Citizens' program for the past two decades.

–Gail Burghardt, Linderman Elementary School



Silly faces with Gail Burghardt and her 2015 third grade class at the Flathead Lake Biological Station!

The Flathead Lakers honored Gail at our Annual Meeting on July 27 for her years of dedication to our watershed education program. Her support and passion, along with her colleagues, have ensured the success and longevity of this program, as well as nurtured scores of passionate watershed citizens!