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Outside classroom takes shape in Gilmanton

By MICHAEL MORTENSEN, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN
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Gilmanton Elementary School teacher Erin Hollingsworth crawls through a tunnel on Saturday at the Gilmanton Elementary School. The tunnel is one of the features at the school's new outdoor classroom. (Alan MacRae photo/for The Laconia Daily Sun)
Alan L. MacRae

GILMANTON — Some think of the schoolyard as just a place for recess, but more and more schools also see the outdoors as a place for learning.

Workers from Belknap Landscaping on Saturday installed parts of an outdoor classroom at the Gilmanton School.

For about seven hours, nine workers installed a circular patio space, laid out stone pathways, built a tunnel students can crawl through, created planting space, and installed underground utilities, according to Jeff Sirles, brand coordinator for Belknap Landscape, which donated labor for the project.



The idea of the outdoor classroom has been in the works for about three years, said Erin Hollingsworth, a second-grade teacher at Gilmanton School, a K-through-8 school with an enrollment of about 400 students.

The plan had been for the work to start this spring, but that was postponed because of the COVID-19 outbreak which forced the school to close. But organizers pushed to have the construction take place during the summer so the outdoor classroom will be ready whenever students return to the school for classes.

While the idea of the outdoor classroom predates the coronavirus pandemic, it will now be an especially valuable educational tool because it will provide fresh air, hands-on learning opportunities and the health benefits associated with increased access to nature.

The Gilmanton PTA has played a critical role in funding the project.

Just over \$11,000 remained in the treasury of the Gilmanton After School Program when it disbanded a few years ago, explained Melissa Beale, treasurer of the Gilmanton PTA. In addition the project got about another \$2,000 from grants it received from the NH Audubon, as well as from the state Fish and Game Department, New Hampshire Project Learning Tree and the New England office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The PTA also donated some money of its own, which brought the amount up to an even \$15,000, Beale said



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“It’s been great to get it going,” Hollingsworth said of the project. She was especially grateful for the work Belknap Landscape has put into the project.

In addition to donating the labor on Saturday, Gilbert Block and landscaping products supplier Techo-Bloc donated materials, Sirles said.

Hollingsworth said she can foresee the outdoor classroom being used for reading or writing assignments related to lessons having to do with nature. The planting beds and interactive tunnel will give students a hands-on understanding about how plants grow and other forms of environmental education.

“We have a strong program for learning outdoors, including having a naturalist from Prescott Farm who comes regularly to talk to the students,” said Hollingsworth who has a background in environmental education.

While volunteers have been involved and will continue to be connected to the project, only Belknap Landscaping employees were part of Saturday’s work party because of the presence of heavy equipment.

More work needs to be done, Hollingsworth explained.

An archway, which was created by students working in collaboration with the school’s artist-in-residence, needs to be installed. Plans also call for a water feature which will be a demonstration of aquatic life, Hollingsworth said.

She hoped the outdoor classroom will evolve in the coming years.

“It will continue to be adjusted and added to,” she said. “We want it to be capable of being changed.”



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