



Nature Connections Program Awarded Conservation Education Grant

Nature Connections, a local group of early childhood professionals, has been awarded \$33,336 from the REAP Conservation Education Program (CEP) Grant for 2013-2014. The funding will support Young Investigators, a program aimed at training early childhood educators in outdoor learning and making high quality staff development affordable to rural audiences.

Young Investigators, which will start its second year this fall, is a five-year program dedicated to training early childhood educators in project learning—a system where early learners choose an interest and work together to solve problems and think creatively. Young Investigators aims at restoring children’s connection to the natural world while providing valuable professional development for early childhood professionals.

First year participants have already seen results with their students. “It has been an eye-opener to see how you can truly incorporate all the content areas with things found in nature and how it enhances appreciation for nature at the same time,” Estherville Lincoln Central Preschool teacher Julie Bates said. “The children are always happier outside than inside. Happy kids make learning fun!”

This year, a new cohort of approximately 70 teachers, administrators, and naturalists will begin the program. The first cohort of 65 participants will return for follow-up training this fall. The first two cohorts will reach 1600 students in two years. Cohort I comprises the following local school districts and their HeadStart Programs: East Sac, Emmetsburg, Estherville, Harris Lake Park, Sioux Central, Spencer, and Storm Lake. Cohort II comprises local school districts and HeadStart Programs from Alta-Aurelia, Humboldt, Manson-Northwest Webster, Newell-Fonda, Spirit Lake, Storm Lake, Twin Rivers, West Bend-Mallard, and a second team from Spencer.

Educators also find that the connections they form with each other helps facilitate children’s learning. “Young Investigators helps foster environmentally mindful citizenry at a young age by helping to create and sustain advantageous partnerships between formal and non-formal educators,” said Jenna Pollock, naturalist with the Emmet County Conservation Board.

Dr. Judy Harris Helm, promoter of a national movement based on children’s natural curiosity, will lead the program. An international speaker and trainer on best practices in education, Dr. Helm has authored seven books on project work, documentation and assessment. Her book *Young Investigators: The Project Approach*

in the Early Years will be utilized during the training this fall and provided to all participants.

Nature Connections Partners include: Creative Ventures, Dickinson County Conservation Board and Foundation, Early Childhood Iowa: Lakes Region, Friends of Lakeside Lab, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Iowa Lakeside Laboratory Regents Resource Center, Patrice & Rita Leary Foundation, Prairie Lakes AEA, early childhood educators, and UDMO Head Start/Early Head Start.

To learn more about Nature Connections visit:

<http://www.friendsoflakesidelab.org/connections.html>

More information about the REAP - CEP grant program is available at:

[http://www.iowadnr.gov/Environment/REAP/REAPFundingatWork/Conservation Education.aspx](http://www.iowadnr.gov/Environment/REAP/REAPFundingatWork/ConservationEducation.aspx)