

RITA in Action

Reaching Youth Through Conservation Education at Bluestem Nature Center

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As many of us know, getting conservation programs into traditional classrooms can be



challenging. Between testing requirements, packed schedules, and standardized curriculum demands, teachers often have limited flexibility to bring in outside programming. But outreach doesn't have to stop at the school door. One often underused opportunity is partnering with local homeschool groups, many of which are actively looking for hands-on learning experiences and reasons to get students outdoors.

White County SWCD has been exploring this avenue by working with a local homeschool group to host educational sessions at Bluestem Nature Center in Monticello. These families are eager for real-world, science-based learning, and the Nature Center provides the perfect backdrop for meaningful environmental education.

Over the past several sessions, we've covered a variety of conservation topics including soil health, watershed science, and ecology. Most recently, we celebrated Earth Day with a full water-quality program using the Jr. Hoosier Riverwatch curriculum. This free IDEM resource is an excellent tool for introducing students to stream monitoring.

During the event, students learned how to measure pH, dissolved oxygen, orthophosphate, nitrate/nitrite, temperature, and turbidity—each test helping them understand different aspects of stream health. They also dove into macroinvertebrate identification, using an ID key along with live samples collected that morning and preserved specimens provided by IDEM.



After the classroom portion, we headed down to the creek for hands-on sampling. Students flipped rocks, used dip nets, and searched for macroinvertebrates, followed by a streambank habitat assessment to determine whether the site could support species with different pollution tolerances. It was a muddy, engaging, and highly successful day.

The Jr. Riverwatch lesson plans added fun activities and games that kept students excited and involved. Based on the positive response from families, we are planning additional Riverwatch days in the future.



Partnering with homeschool groups has shown us that there are many ways to reach youth beyond the traditional classroom. These groups are enthusiastic, flexible, and often grateful for structured, outdoor learning opportunities. If you're looking to expand your outreach when school scheduling becomes a barrier, homeschool partnerships can be a valuable and rewarding option.

And if you haven't yet, I highly recommend attending a Hoosier Riverwatch training yourself! It's a fantastic way to bring water-quality education to life.