


# *experience* LEARNING



beyond the classroom





At the root of all of our programs is our vision — a world where individuals have the competence and confidence to bring positive change in their own lives, the lives of others, their communities, and the world around them. To realize this vision, we offer programs that focus on developing effective community members through *beyond-the-classroom*, outdoor learning opportunities. On the following pages, we dive into the philosophy and approach that make our mission come to life and our programs have a lasting impact.

There is a growing dialogue around the importance of preparing students with 21st century skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. These skills are the backbone of our program experience. We tend to think of these as timeless values, equally at home in the mountains, in the classroom, or in the boardroom.

We invite you to learn more about our organization and our programs in the pages that follow. We hope you too will see the value in joining us *beyond-the-classroom*.

# the big picture



# Our Philosophy

Our goal at Experience Learning is to instill in our students the three key components of our programming:

1.



Environmental literacy; an understanding of the world around us and in which we must live

2.

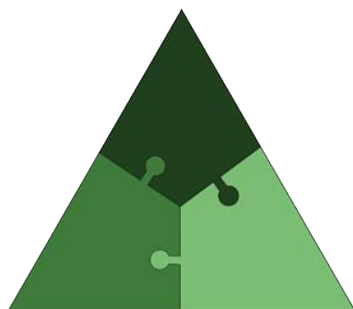


Information alone isn't enough. We need to have a belief in ourselves; that we can affect change.

3.

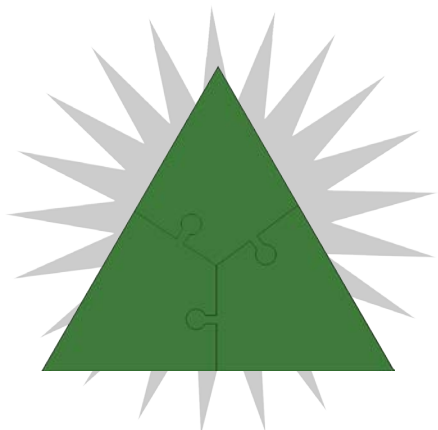


Armed with competence and confidence, we must next understand and be inspired to take part in larger dialogue and practice effective leadership and followership.



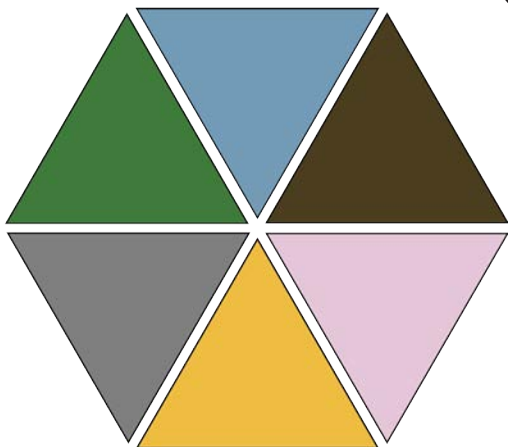
With these three pieces assembled via adventure and academic components, we seal the cracks with times of reflection and absorption of our experiences and ...





...each participant feels a heightened sense of accomplishment.

These newly-honed skills are used to become an effective and contributing member in the small-group. Through our process students are able to scale this from the group to the class, school, and eventually the larger community.



# Our Approach

We believe in the power of wild places.

Our two extensive campuses plus the adjoining millions of acres of National Forest provide a truly wild experience for all participants. There will be no phone reception so students must unplug both their electronic devices and their day-to-day expectations and plug into what is happening exclusively in the here and the now. Their focus will be necessary too as we will challenge them and push the edges of their comfort zones. They will learn risk management and mastery of new skills.

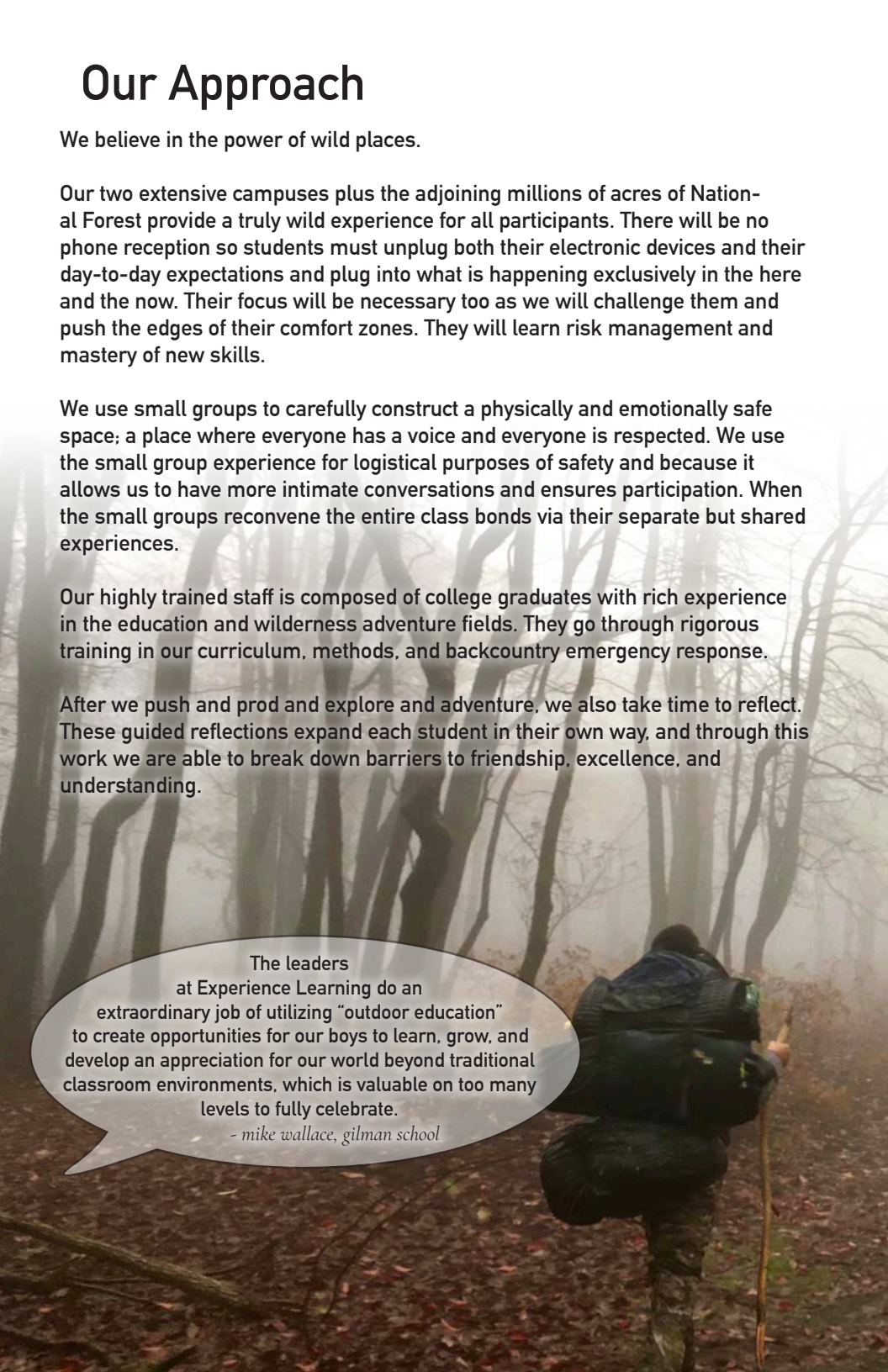
We use small groups to carefully construct a physically and emotionally safe space; a place where everyone has a voice and everyone is respected. We use the small group experience for logistical purposes of safety and because it allows us to have more intimate conversations and ensures participation. When the small groups reconvene the entire class bonds via their separate but shared experiences.

Our highly trained staff is composed of college graduates with rich experience in the education and wilderness adventure fields. They go through rigorous training in our curriculum, methods, and backcountry emergency response.

After we push and prod and explore and adventure, we also take time to reflect. These guided reflections expand each student in their own way, and through this work we are able to break down barriers to friendship, excellence, and understanding.

The leaders  
at Experience Learning do an  
extraordinary job of utilizing "outdoor education"  
to create opportunities for our boys to learn, grow, and  
develop an appreciation for our world beyond traditional  
classroom environments, which is valuable on too many  
levels to fully celebrate.

- mike wallace, gilman school





This component is geared towards lessons focused on understanding our role in the local landscape. Students will get to experiment, practice, and learn while making connections with content that is hard to visualize indoors such as learning geology inside a cave or studying forest ecology and human impact in a red pine grove.



This element is most effectively addressed through immersion experiences. Students will unplug from the hustle and bustle of their daily lives and truly connect with the landscape and with each other through shared experiences in rugged, wild places. We use adventure components to highlight perceived risk, while reflection and group processing allows individuals to realize their own potential and that of the group when working effectively together.

Finally we focus on transferring lessons learned in the field back into the greater school community. This can take the form of leadership intensives or stewardship driven experiences. We also offer a range of unique opportunities to practice and further develop skills like public speaking, writing and journaling, personal awareness, or risk assessment. Along the way, students will assume leadership and followership roles as they learn firsthand what it means to both struggle and succeed through setting and achieving tangible goals.



#### Experience

Learning has for a long time been dedicated to understanding our students, and on each trip builds a program to meet our goals. The experience we have each year creates a channel for learning that helps students further understand and internalize skills for planning, organization, problem solving and risk taking, and shows how these skills lead to success and happiness. We also have a wonderful time, and the experience is a staple of school culture and our collective memories.

- greg koehlert, headmaster, winston prep

# Program Options

All Experience Learning programming is customized to the needs of our clients.

## Wilderness-based Programming

Field-based programs offer the opportunity to truly rely on each other to eat, navigate and to stay warm and dry. These experiences strengthen or refine communication skills along the way and help develop relationships between group members. These courses excel at promoting personal growth and the development of grit, determination and compassion.



Residential programs are ideal for younger populations and shorter stays. Staying in dormitories onsite, our Spruce Knob Mountain Center is the perfect venue for increasing environmental literacy and learning to read the landscape. For some groups this makes the outdoor classroom more accessible and enjoyable.

Looking for the best of both worlds? Some groups prefer to merge both lodging options by camping onsite at our Spruce Knob Mountain Center or Sweetwater Farm with access to amenities and prepared food.

Both types of programs can be run on one of our West Virginia campuses or in a forest, park or wilderness area near you.







**Nearby Nature** is a regional program that provides teacher professional development and implementation support to engage students in their schools and communities. The program focuses on integrating curriculum with school building and schoolyard investigations to create meaningful and hands-on learning.

**Appalachian Watershed & Stream Monitors (AWSM)** is a three-part program that involves a summer workshop for teachers, a watershed analysis experience for the class on our campus and then a second watershed analysis in the home community.

**Community Action in the Classroom** is a collaborative project with Earth Force developed for teachers interested in using their skills to incorporate active civics, Next Generation Science Standards, STEM, and stewardship into their classrooms through project-based learning.

We also partner with school districts and counties to develop county-wide outdoor education programs. These programs focus on connecting students to the natural, human, and cultural assets of their community. Students spend their time immersed in locally-relevant activities and incorporate community members in teaching and sharing.

For many years, our trip was connected to our reading of *The Hobbit*. Spruce Knob became the Lonely Mountain, the Sinks of Gandy served as Gollum's Cave, Spruce Knob Lake became Long Lake, and the surrounding forest was Mirkwood. Students worked together to orienteer up a mountain, maneuver a canoe, and traverse a cave as well as learn about Karst topography, orogeny in the Appalachians, water quality in headwater streams, and taking care of our environment. They completed journal entries and creative writing assignments based on Bilbo's adventures that fit each location and what they had learned from each activity.

- brock perkins,  
winchester thurston

As a result of AWSM my students made the connection with benthic macroinvertebrates and their importance in the local fly fishing economy. They have expressed an interest in learning more about trout streams and their health. We are currently in the process of exploring a Trout in The Classroom project because of the interest that was piqued during the AWSM activities.

- julie colaws,  
5th grade, petersburg elementary

# Campuses and Facilities



We truly believe that we have the best location for outdoor environmental education in the country. Our Spruce Knob base has mountain tops, headwater streams in both the Chesapeake and Gulf of Mexico watersheds, boulders, wild caves, pristine forests and tree plantations. Our Sweetwater Farm campus adds on-site livestock and agriculture initiatives as well as an area of volcanic activity. Our home is in one of the most diverse ecosystems in the world, with access to the largest uninterrupted tract of National Forest east of the Mississippi River. It is an incomparable course area.

Our main course area is bounded by forest roads, allowing assistance by our support vehicles and more accessible emergency response than any other wilderness. Our combination of proximity to wilderness and to a comfortable base camp gives programs a low risk of failure due to weather conditions.

We understand that some may not be able to join us in West Virginia so we also conduct successful programs elsewhere. We have been running trips along trails and rivers up and down the east coast since the 1970s.





## Consulting

If you are excited about developing a school culture of adventure, environmental literacy and personal growth but don't know where to start, Experience Learning offers consulting services to work with administrators and teachers to develop a model that will work for your school.

We can help develop integrated curricula to use your schoolyard habitats and local opportunities to springboard a habit of getting kids outside and immersed in the natural world in appropriate doses. We can help prepare students for larger adventure trips, at the same time, helping them understand their responsibility and potential for improving the human condition and the natural world.

## Summer Programming

In the summer, we use our campus and staff to run summer camps for middle and high school kids, professional development workshops for teachers, and wilderness first aid courses. Organizations rent our facilities for retreats and meetings and we play host to a large bike race and ultra-marathon race. Our campus is almost always available to visitors, campers, star gazers and adventurers to rent tent or yurt space for a nominal fee.

## Student Feedback

We take our job very seriously, but a large part of that involves serious fun as well. We think the students' faces, words, and lives are the best proof of this.

I never knew  
the woods could be so much fun!

I learned that if I put my mind to something I really can do it!

This was the best field trip ever, and we even went to the Carnegie Museum!

I've never been in the woods before and being out here makes me  
want to explore it on my own time more!



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