

Designing the Mindfulness Meadow

Case Study

The challenge

The schools in Harrisonburg, Virginia have lots of land. But not many schools use this as an opportunity for learning—most of the time students are constrained to learning indoors—despite evidence that **spending time outside during the school day has been proven to improve both educational and social-emotional learning outcomes for school-age children.*** Local educator Brooke Imber, an art teacher at Keister Elementary School (KES), set out to change this reality. During the 2023-2024 school year, she worked on developing an outdoor learning space called the Mindfulness Meadow. This space was situated near classrooms, so that it was easily accessible to students and teachers (even those with limited mobility). Community partners such as the Rotary Club planted dozens of native trees, an Eagle Scout built a circular meeting space for classes to gather, and volunteers installed posts for dozens of hammocks in a “hammock haven,” and laid stones and pathways for a labyrinth. The new outdoor learning space was magical.

A JMU-KES design collaboration

Assistant Professor Elisabeth Kvernen reached out to Brooke Imber at the beginning of 2024 to find ways for her students in the School of Media Arts & Design (SMAD) at James Madison University (JMU) to work with Keister Elementary School students on a design project. The SMAD students were learning about visual communication and storytelling, and how to use creative software such as Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign. **Imber and Kvernen decided that Keister and JMU students would collaborate on printed educational materials to promote mindfulness and kindness—specifically tied to the creation of this new outdoor learning space.** The production of these materials was supported by JMU’s faculty senate and the School of Media Arts & Design.

It was important for Keister students to guide the process from the start. They started by writing haikus and creating artwork that envisioned what this outdoor learning space could look like. JMU students then developed these haikus into posters for a collaborative art gallery. **Keister students were able to see their words designed into polished, printed visual designs.** Over the course of several months, elementary students collaborated with university students by sharing additional poems, outdoor mindfulness activity ideas, and artwork. University students developed these materials into “story walk” sign designs and sticker sheets for the mindfulness meadow that celebrated outdoor learning and promoted kindness and mindfulness.

The outcome

The mindfulness meadow is now full of creative and interesting prompts for learning, thanks to this collaboration. For example, one sign says, “Play a game of I-Spy” and encourages KES students to observe their surroundings. Another sign asks, “What is something you love about yourself?” and lists a series of question prompts to help students think more deeply about this question. Each sign is nestled into an outdoor learning space that includes a hammock haven, a stone labyrinth, a circular gathering area, and a myriad of native trees and flowers provided by the Department of Public Works in Harrisonburg.

The collaboration culminated in an opening event for the mindfulness meadow, where parents and children from KES celebrated outdoor learning and these new outdoor learning spaces. In May 2024, over 200 parents and students visited the school and had a chance to view a collaborative art gallery, follow prompts for mindfulness activities in the outdoor learning space, and bring home sticker sheets designed by JMU SMAD students that highlighted themes of mindfulness and kindness.

Through this collaboration, elementary students came to understand the power and impact of their creative ideas. JMU students consulted with KES students during the process on what content to include, and incorporated KES student artwork and learning prompts in the final outdoor signs. Most signs are in both Spanish and English, since KES has a dual-language enrollment program. The outcome is a collaboratively-designed outdoor learning space that improves educational and social-emotional learning outcomes for children, and is welcome to all.

Press

[Local elementary school’s ‘mindfulness meadow’ sprouts student engagement](#)

[Mindfulness Meadow Sprouts Community Connections](#)

Teachers / Curators / Facilitators:

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Collaborating agencies:

Keister Elementary School

James Madison University
School of Media Arts & Design

James Madison University
Faculty Senate

City of Harrisonburg Department of
Public Works

Harrisonburg Education Foundation

Virginia Department of Forestry

* See the article, [“Why Kids Need to spend time in Nature,”](#) by Danielle Cohen, published by the Child Mind Institute.

Process Photos

JMU students visit Keister Elementary School for initial brainstorming



Process Photos

Installation of final collaborative designs



Process Photos

May 2024 community celebration event

