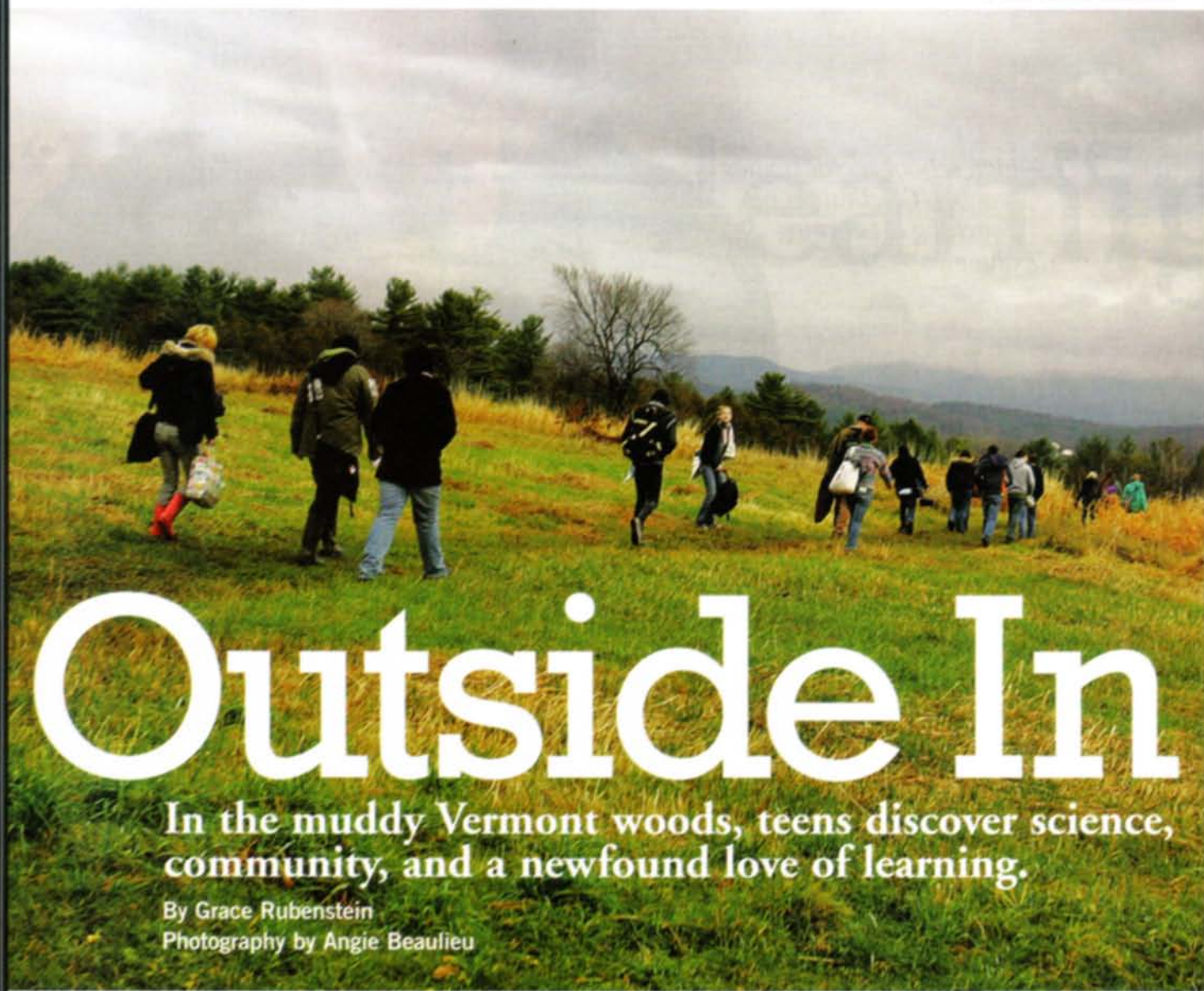


Daily Constitutional: Walden Project students tramp across soggy fields to their outdoor classroom.



# Outside In

In the muddy Vermont woods, teens discover science, community, and a newfound love of learning.

By Grace Rubenstein

Photography by Angie Beaulieu

**T**he clouds are still thick from recent rain as nineteen students board a bus outside Vergennes Union High School (VUHS), in rural Vergennes, Vermont. They leave cement-block walls and linoleum-tile halls that conjure images of *The Breakfast Club* and other movies about high school to ride for fifteen minutes past rolling green hayfields and stands of bare trees, sagging barns and modest ranch houses. When they get off the bus on a country highway, four of them stop to pull kale and tall leeks from a garden for the day's lunch. Then they follow the others 500 feet down a soggy trail to the grove of red cedars that is their classroom.

As they gather in a circle, teacher Julia Bunting suggests they introduce themselves to several guests by playing a name

game: The students will take turns telling what they want to be when they grow up. Jamison "Jamo" Bannister, a skinny sophomore in a black leather jacket, looks at her disbelievingly and says, "What do you think this is—school?"

**The Walden Project** is not school in the traditional sense. It is a community of nineteen students and two teachers who use this former farmland for what the founder calls a "great, living template for education." They spend three days a week outdoors, through fall, bitter winter, and spring. On Tuesdays, for Field Sociology class and writing, the students visit government offices, nonprofit organizations, and other institutions in Burlington, a college town of 40,000 located 20 miles away.

On Fridays, they work at internships in their areas of interest, such as Web design or photography.

Matt Schlein, who had taught English, drama, and psychology at VUHS for six years, founded the project in 2000 with a vision of authentic, student-directed learning based in nature. He created a small foundation, Willowell, and collected grants and donations to buy the 230 acres Walden Project participants call simply "the land"—a swath of sloping fields spotted with woods and ringed by the Green Mountains. About twenty to twenty-five students attend each year.

The educational model springs from Henry David Thoreau's semihermetic experience at Walden Pond in the 1800s, when he abandoned conventional work for two years and immersed himself in the outdoors. "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately," Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, "to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

The point, Schlein says, is to step outside the chaos of everyday expectations to "think deeply about where I am right now and what's essential," searching nature and oneself for inspiration. Though he can name private programs that base their education in the local environment, such as central Vermont's Mountain School and the Island School, in the Bahamas, he knows of none so rooted in Thoreau's transcendentalism.

Schlein, who has a full red beard and an actor's energy, covers the English and social science portions of the curriculum. Julia Bunting, the science teacher, has blue eyes and a gentle demeanor that belies her ruggedness; in summer, she leads whitewater-raft trips through Canada's Yukon and Northwest Territories wilderness. Their program is a satellite of the 680-student VUHS, funded by the school within its regular per-pupil budget.

Starting in their sophomore year, students may choose to spend up to three years, depending on their level of interest, in the Walden Project. (For upper-level math, physics, or chemistry courses, which the curriculum omits, students must go to community college or return to the high school for those classes.) Some teens come here to escape the rigidity of regular school, while others just want the experience; all learn about environmental science and literature, and how to think for themselves.

**On this morning,** the teens amble over soft, needle-strewn ground to sit in a circle of rough benches, discarded office chairs, and an upholstered seat from a van. About 40 feet away stands an A-frame shanty built with the limbs of on-site trees lashed together with rope and covered in donated maritime sails. On the most frigid days, the group takes refuge inside.

Nick Cormier, a blond-bearded senior, starts class with a daily reading of an excerpt by Thoreau or other transcendentalists. Today, it's from *Civil Disobedience*. A vigorous discussion follows on whether it is better to work with or against government to create change.

For another hour or so, the group continues with Foundations in Social and Systems Theory class, casually called "Newsy Notes," in which students toss out topics from current events for discussion. An exercise that could unravel into chaos is kept cogent and purposeful by the teachers' gentle steering and the students' sophisticated arguments, which they lace with references to history, philosophy, and literature. Their voices mingle with the sounds of birds' screeches and, less frequently, the gunshots of not-so-distant hunters.

Sitting in a circle in these woods, there's no space for whispering or passing notes, only listening. There are no hall passes; when students need a break, they walk away. Sometimes this

**GET SMART**  
**DURING THE TIME**  
**HENRY DAVID THOREAU**  
**LIVED AT WALDEN**  
**POND, HIS MOTHER**  
**DID HIS LAUNDRY.**



freedom frustrates sophomore Kate Houskeeper, who feels it allows some of her classmates to be rude. Yet when you're face-to-face with peers and teachers, who all know just how hard you're working—or slacking—there's no hiding in the back of the classroom, either.

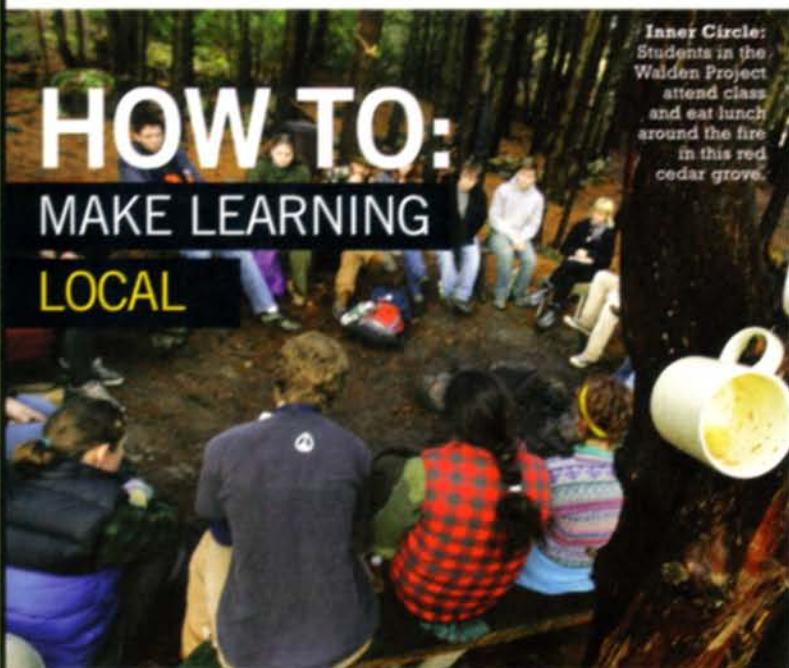
"You can't bullshit your way through this," says senior Chris Newton.

Houskeeper at first felt overwhelmed by the flexibility at Walden, where students must invent their own projects and make progress on yearlong portfolios without daily assignments. Comparatively, she says, the structure of regular high school was familiar and comforting.

Indeed, a stranger visiting Walden could be dismayed by its seeming anarchy. Students rarely take notes. They curse. If one is distressed by personal problems, he or she may leave class to spend time in the woods alone. The teens have to combat perceptions among students and teachers at VUHS that Walden is a place where the "bad kids" go, or even, according to one of the most extreme rumors, where they sit around the fire smoking pot. However, Newton—speaking for many of his classmates—says, "From an outsider's point of view, we don't have a lot of structure, but we just have a different definition of structure, and I feel like we're learning more by doing it that way."

What they're learning, students say, is as much about science and writing as self-direction and a love of learning. Given license to pursue his own interests, one boy several years ago built a gayout canoe. At least a half dozen students have

**Nature and Nurture:** Senior Chris Newton (left) cuts kindling for the campfire. Julia Walsh, also a senior, reads to her classmates from Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*.



**Inner Circle:** Students in the Walden Project attend class and eat lunch around the fire in this red cedar grove.

# HOW TO: MAKE LEARNING LOCAL

As Walden Project graduate Kelsey Stetson says, it's almost as if the fields and trees outside Vergennes, Vermont, were waiting for a nature-based education program like Walden.

Yet educators anywhere can broker this marriage of location and learning, even without 230 acres of Vermont farmland. Emily Watson-Blagden, an AmeriCorps VISTA member who helps at Walden, included a case study of place-based education in her bachelor's thesis at Hampshire College. She says place exists everywhere when you are willing to stretch the concept beyond the physical environment to the community.

"It's a scale, starting with the small and immediate and close," she says, "like starting with the temperate forest that's right near your school as a way to understand a tropical rain forest," or using a shop down the street to comprehend the larger forces of commerce.

Watson-Blagden says the concept of place-based education has taken root over the past ten to twenty years, fueled, in part, by Annenberg Rural Challenge grants, launched in 1995 to improve rural schools by linking them more with their communities. The Rural School and Community Trust, which emerged from the Annenberg initiative, defines place-based education as learning grounded in "the unique history, environment, culture, economy, literature, and art of a particular place." In this model, according to the trust administrators, "student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning."

This kind of education engages students, says Walden founder Matt Schlein, because the real, local connection helps answer the students' perennial question "Why are we learning this?"



## Examples of how educators use place as a locus for learning:

**Common Ground High School**, a charter school in New Haven, Connecticut, links curriculum to community in four trimester-long core courses. In Four Corners class, for example, teens investigate the histories of city neighborhoods and conduct oral-history interviews with residents. Environmental Justice, which examines issues affecting students' own neighborhoods and the politics involved, includes student-led outreach for public awareness. Exploiting its location on 20 acres of city parkland, Common Ground, with help from its 150 students, also operates an organic farm.

**King Middle School**, in Portland, Maine, leads its 500 students through a series of eight- to twelve-week experiential-learning expeditions each year. The projects span multiple disciplines, involve the community, and demand that students conduct research and present their products to legitimate audiences. For instance, a group of sixth-grade students this school year did an expedition on mapping, which included surveying local forests, receiving guidance from professional cartographers, and creating thematic maps of their own lives. Another group of sixth graders studied the relationship between food and culture, visiting local ethnic restaurants to sample menu items and planning a school garden.

**Miner County Community Revitalization**, a local-development organization in South Dakota, is recruiting teens to help revitalize the rural county, which is strained by unemployment. With a grant from the federal Department of Health and Human Services, the organization has asked students to conduct local interviews, surveys, and data analysis to create strategies for such efforts as promoting organic industry and combating poverty. In Corsica, a city of 625 people, high school seniors research the potential for a local housing collaborative as part of their capstone project. *Rural Roots*, the newsletter of the Rural School and Community Trust, says these seniors ultimately will present a proposal and work with city planners to help make the plan a reality.

**The Heritage Project** turns high school students in Arizona and Montana into local historians. Project leaders in each state help the teens conduct oral-history interviews and other research to chronicle local heritage. The students examine such questions as the significance of the land for the people of Arizona's Colorado River Indian Tribes Reservation, how the wives of military men stationed in the Arizona Territory contributed to their community, and how residents of Libby, Montana, responded to the influx of people during the construction of the Libby Dam. Students finally create exhibits and multimedia documentaries, which are displayed and archived in local museums and at the Library of Congress. —GR

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