

NEW “WELLNESS WALK” AT ROBERT J. KAISER MIDDLE SCHOOL BRIDGES NATURE AND LEARNING

MONTICELLO, November 3, 2020 - Students at Robert J. Kaiser Middle School in Monticello have a new way to release stress, connect with nature and encourage a deeper state of mindfulness – all without leaving the property. A one-mile “Wellness Walk” has been hewn out of the woods behind the school by health and physical education teachers Scott Cooper and Rich Sternkopf.

“The kids love coming out here, especially now,” said Mr. Cooper. “With anxiety rates skyrocketing, being out here really helps. They say it’s the best part of their day.”

Mr. Cooper leads groups of students, from as few as five to as many as 20, through the woods, pointing out the sound of the wind whistling through the trees, the crispness in the air, or the leaves falling gracefully from the sky to earth. As they meander through the path, there are encouraging signs and trail markers created by art teacher Eliz Bassett. For some kids, it’s their first foray into hiking – and they love it.

In fact, they enjoy being in the outdoors so much they’ve begun to take ownership of the path, actively seeking out ways to make it better. The students are learning about the “leave no trace” philosophy of hiking. Unasked, the students have begun picking up garbage, building cairns and brainstorming ways to improve the trail. The trail passes by a water tower that is covered in graffiti, and the students dream of repainting the tower and replacing the graffiti with positive affirmations.

“One part of what we teach in health class is advocacy,” Mr. Cooper said. “We teach kids to try to make things around them better and their taking ownership over the wellness trail is a perfect example of that.”

Just the virtue of being outside seems to have a transformative effect on the students. Mr. Cooper noted how students who barely utter a word in class jabber away with their peers once they leave the walls of the building. Students who are prone to fidgeting and restlessness are able to focus and calm themselves.

In the future, Mr. Cooper and Mr. Sternkopf hope to see the trail continue to grow and possibly even add fitness stations and open it up to the community.

“Nature heals,” Mr. Cooper said. “And we need it.”

