

Think GRAND

A Place Based Education Initiative for West Michigan



Project Overview

“All the wonders of the wide world may best understood in the microcosm of one’s backyard.”

The Grand River, which flows through the heart of our community, is undoubtedly Kent County’s most significant and perhaps most valuable natural feature. The river and its surrounding valley have been shared by people, plants and animals throughout most of its 13,000 year history. Though it has suffered through many changes over time, the river continues to provide an expansive and ecologically rich natural corridor in the midst of our urban and suburban environments. If the Grand is looked at as a living textbook, its many chapters have much to teach us ecologically, culturally, historically and economically.

The ThinkGRAND project will use the story of the Grand River to teach about the interrelationships of our community, our natural resources and the outcomes of our economic and social choices. The project will take place through a series of interconnected, hands-on, study projects exploring the natural history, human history and ecology of the Grand River in Kent County. This collaborative initiative, coordinated by the Great Lakes Lifeways Institute, will bring together students and teachers from two leading area environmental schools, the Goodwillie Environmental School and the Blandford School with a range of local specialists including naturalists, cultural tradition bearers, historians and biologists. Over the course of the three year project, students will help create, participate in and document interdisciplinary projects focused on creating resources that provide an in depth understanding of the Grand River in the following areas:

- geological processes that have created the river and surrounding valley
- the changing floral and faunal communities over time
- the diverse historical cultural groups who have occupied the river valley over time - how and why these groups utilized and placed value on the river and surrounding natural resources
- land use, development and major economic patterns and impacts on the river valley
- environmental quality of the river and surrounding landscape - past, present, future

The project will utilize the following strategies to achieve our overall goal of strengthening locally focused environmental education in West Michigan:

- Build collaboration and synergy between two leading area environmental schools through the development of shared vision, curricular goals, resources, technology and program content
- Develop and share effective/replicable models for the local application of Place Based Environmental Learning to area schools and teachers.
- Create a web based, interactive central resource bank, composed of multimedia materials, resources and lesson plans created through student based projects and research. This web resource will provide much needed engaging and relevant information and curriculum for teachers, students and the general community to teach/learn/discover our local ecology through the rich story of the Grand River.



Organizational Overview

“It is the depth of our roots, our kinship to the land and the richness of our traditions that give meaning to our surroundings and foundations to our identities.”

The Great Lakes Lifeways Institute was founded in 2009, with a vision embrace our region’s rich cultural and biological diversity, to draw strength from our roots and to enrich the lives of residents of West Michigan and the broader Great Lakes Region through cultivating a sense of place. We believe that in order for our local communities to protect and preserve this beautiful region, we must seek to understand it’s uniqueness, historically, culturally and ecologically through meaningful interaction. *Interaction leads to understanding. From understanding comes value... and how can we protect and care for what we do not value?*

Fundamental to the development of all of our programs and their components is building an understanding of our interrelationships with our local environment and their positive and negative impacts, over time, to prepare and inspire future generations for sustainable environmental outcomes.

Project Partners

Great Lakes Lifeways Institute - Project management / fiduciary / coordination
Goodwillie and Blandford Schools - Student based learning / creation of resources

Knowledge/Skill Base

Mary Jane Dockery - Geology
Larry Fegel - Natural History
Dr. Carl Bajema - Lumbering and Sawmills/Early Development
Erik Vosteen - Archeological Resources/Prehistory
Kevin Finney -Historical Research/Historic Native Americans/Cartography
Barb Barton - Water/Environmental Quality/GIS Mapping
Tom Woodruff, Jim Finney- Nature Journaling and Artwork



Educational Outcomes For Students

The 320 students directly participating in this project will:

- develop meaningful relationships with the local environment and a deep value for the place where we live
- gain a working understanding of how natural, cultural, social and economic processes have and continue to shape our local environment and community in West Michigan over time
- cultivate an awareness of our region's current ecological challenges and assets for the future
- build skills and confidence from working directly with local artists, historians, naturalists, scientists and cultural tradition bearers
- make a valuable and lasting social contributions to our community by helping to create unique and relevant educational resources and raise environmental awareness
- Gain inspiration that they can achieve great things! Discover the spirit of the adventure, excitement and mystery in learning!
- learn the value of using interdisciplinary approaches and examining interrelationships
- develop a wide range of technical skills and knowledge base

Outcomes for the Broader Community of Greater Grand Rapids

Our community will benefit from this project by:

- having a lasting, accessible, interactive and engaging centralized source for historical, cultural, geological and ecological information on the Grand Rapids Area's most significant environmental feature - The Grand River
- providing Grand Rapids Area teachers with access to lesson plans, projects and resources to incorporate our region's local history, culture and environment into their existing curriculum
- documenting, archiving and sharing the experiences of local knowledge bearers
- having direct examples of how to engage students in locally focused, community based learning
- increasing community wide awareness and appreciation of the environmental, historical and cultural value of the Grand River

