

# Imagination Narrative



## Little Red Nature Campus

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**Proposal:** To transform the former Little Red Schoolhouse and grounds into Little Red Nature Campus (“LRNC”), a dual-purpose ECASD property, including a newly developed middle school and a nature campus. The school would provide students with an engaging, project-based education with high academic standards and a focus on real-world experiences, community participation, environmental stewardship, and outdoor learning. The campus would serve the entire student body of the ECASD by creating space and providing facilities for field trips, summer classes, special programs and intensive study courses.

**Our Vision:** Little Red Nature Campus aims to provide Eau Claire students with a learning environment that fosters independence, critical thinking and creativity. Through innovative programming and connecting students with nature, we will nurture in students a love of learning, a sense of awe and wonder of the natural world, and a deep respect for self, others, and the environment. Our dual-purpose campus will create a unique opportunity for all ECASD children, utilizing the Wisconsin wilderness as an extension of the classroom. The formative education experienced at LRNC will prepare students to be motivated learners, knowledgeable citizens, collaborative workers, and good global stewards.

**WHO is going to benefit from your concept or idea? Is there a specific demographic you hope to attract? Are there others beyond students who may benefit from your program design?**

The middle school at Little Red would benefit up to 150 middle-school-aged students from the Eau Claire Area School District who would have it be their their home school. We envision the school breaking ground with a sixth grade class. As they graduate to seventh grade, inviting in a new class of sixth graders; and repeating the process, until in three years time, all three middle school levels are housed there.

In addition, the Little Red Nature Campus has the ability to fill a void in the education and experiential learning potential of many ECASD children. As residents of Wisconsin, we consider the natural beauty of our state to be an essential part of our identity, a way in which we are all connected to each other and to this beautiful place where we live. Many families are lucky enough to enjoy time at family cabins, boating excursions, and wilderness hiking trips where children interact with the natural world. Some children have the opportunity to go to summer camps which put them in contact with nature and provide an opportunity for crucial skill building and personal development. Yet there are many, many children served by the ECASD that are not privileged enough to enjoy those kinds of experiences. Little Red provides a unique opportunity to give all children within the ECASD access to outdoor education experiences, whether through field trips, summer camps, or intensive studies.

In particular, the nature campus will be inclusive of other district students by:

- Having indoor space reserved for visiting students, such as a multi-use space in the former IMC that could be modified for various educational purposes. The eventual goal would be to develop that part of the building as an interactive library, research and natural history space in which a wide variety of learning can take place.
- Being a destination for ECASD summer and after-school programming.
- Having a rotation program during which district students, such as other middle schoolers, could take advantage of the whole facility during weeks that the middle school is not in session (we plan to operate with a “balanced calendar” approach as opposed to the traditional school year calendar in part to create this opportunity).
- Hosting school field trips to the campus to utilize the commercial kitchen; take in special presentations from naturalist experts; receive hands-on lessons in botany, ecology, or forestry; or enjoy outdoor recreation such as hiking, snowshoeing, or cross country skiing.

These are just a few examples of possible projects for district students. We look forward to hearing ideas from district staff and administration on how all students could benefit from this concept.

Other beneficiaries would include:

- Educators in the district looking to try something “out of the box”, who could serve as program creators, school leaders/full time staff, summer/after school staff, or could lead their own students’ projects at the site.

- The ECASD, which would be able to experiment with ideas such as alternative assessments, later start times for students, and year-round schooling. LRNC could also provide additional students to the district by attracting students who have elected to leave the district to take advantage of alternative middle school options, to be homeschooled, or to enroll in school online rather than attend traditional middle school in the district.
- Community organizations that could benefit from partnerships with students and use of the facility.
- The City of Eau Claire, which would be able to attract residents drawn by innovative schooling options.

It remains to be seen what partnerships will grow with this project. We see LRNC as something that would be built by a large team of students, parents, district staff, and community members who are invested in this asset of our community.

In terms of student body demographics, we believe that all middle school students could potentially benefit from attending this program. We hope to attract a diverse student body of independent learners and plan to work with each family to determine whether LRNC would be a good fit for their child. In order to make acceptance to the middle school fair and equitable, admission would be by random lottery to which any district child entering middle school could apply. Each child, with a few exceptions such as priorities for children of staff, would have an equal chance of being able to attend.

Marketing material would be produced in multiple languages and in ways accessible to those with disabilities. We could have “preview” days, during which each 4th grade student in the district would spend the day at LRNC shadowing a current student in order to get an idea whether LRNC would appeal to them, based on their individual interests and learning style. Application information would be given to families of all 5th grade students living in the district to ensure that every family was informed about the school and had an equal opportunity to apply.

**WHY is your idea or concept important/innovative? Share the research or experiences that support your program design. Why are you interested in trying this?**

**Why This Program, This Place, This Time:**

Education is trending toward a system of structuring learning to fit the student, rather than the traditional approach of requiring the student to adapt to a rigid structure. The ECASD has a unique opportunity to pioneer within our community a method of adolescent education that meets high national academic standards and serves the whole child, all while honoring the immense natural beauty of the Little Red campus with an instructional program that fully utilizes the land with its nature-based approach. This would be a highly engaging setting for approximately 100-150 ECASD 6th, 7th, and 8th graders and we think they would have an outstanding middle school experience there. In addition, the project would give dynamic, passionate teachers looking for challenges outside the traditional classroom a place to flourish and shine. There is a strong, proven desire for innovative learning environments in our community, as shown by the popularity of charter schools in the area. We believe this is a tremendous opportunity to turn Little Red into Eau Claire’s

Nature Campus: it would serve not just as a school but as a setting for field trips, summer programs, guest programming, and community partnerships. We believe it could be the launch point for a new crop of Eau Claire’s nature lovers, flexible thinkers, creative problem solvers, effective leaders, and good global citizens.

**HOW are you going to organize a structure to support and sustain your program design? Consider the following: curriculum/instruction; learning/performance outcomes, location/schedule/calendar; professional development; supervision/evaluation; program review/assessment/interpretation; student enrollment in/out; community/family partnerships; administrative structure; other.**

Specifics of the program design have not yet been developed (see the “What” section, below), however here are a few core principles we see as being essential to our vision for the school:

1. **Facility, ECASD Nature Campus, and Student Body:** The Little Red Nature Campus would be housed at Little Red on its over 30 acres of surrounding land. The school would serve middle-school-aged students and would be part of the ECASD. The building and land would also be an indoor/outdoor academic setting where students from the ECASD could attend special programs, classes, field trips, expeditions, and intensive study opportunities at the campus. We envision the former Little Red IMC as a versatile space within the building that could be used to welcome visiting ECASD students.
2. **Student-Centered Approach to Traditional Academics:** LRNC would seek to identify each student’s starting point as the basis for mapping academic growth and achievement. The learning environment would be integrated, adaptable and relevant, with each student working alongside his or her teachers to quantify and achieve desired academic benchmarks. Traditional subjects such as math, history, science, and language would be covered using a variety of methods to be determined in conference between teachers and students. LRNC would offer diverse opportunities for students to explore creative expression through activities including music, creative language, performance and art. As our program develops, staff will determine the best method for ensuring all academic subjects are satisfied in a way that honors the culture of our school.
3. **Project-Based Learning:** Learning would be project-based, with a foundation in community, ecology, and environmental stewardship. Traditional academic subjects would be woven into project design, with emphasis on meeting academic benchmarks through chosen projects. Many academic projects would have an outdoor focus and students would have ample time to connect with nature during school hours. Visiting students would have opportunity to experience project-based expedition-style learning while attending special programming at LRNC.
  - a. Project-based learning (PBL) is a model that organizes learning around projects. Projects in this context mean “complex tasks, based on challenging questions or problems, that involve students in design, problem-solving, decision making, or investigative activities; give students the opportunity to work relatively autonomously over extended periods of time; and culminate in realistic products or presentations”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas, John W., “A Review of Research on Project-Based Learning” (2015), available at [https://www.bie.org/object/document/a\\_review\\_of\\_research\\_on\\_project\\_based\\_learning](https://www.bie.org/object/document/a_review_of_research_on_project_based_learning).

- b. Studies comparing learning outcomes for students taught via project-based learning versus traditional instruction show that when implemented well, PBL increases long-term retention of content, helps students perform as well as or better than traditional learners in high-stakes tests, improves problem-solving and collaboration skills, and improves students' attitudes towards learning.<sup>2</sup>
  - c. Student learning would be tracked by Project Foundry or a similar system. Project Foundry is a portfolio system that ensures students meet academic standards by organizing projects around set academic goals and tracking progress towards those goals. Project Foundry has been used successfully in regional schools like Milwaukee Public Schools, Northwest Passage High School in Coon Rapids, MN and Wildlands School in Augusta, WI.<sup>3</sup>
  - d. Expeditionary Learning is a project-based learning program evolved to incorporate elements of wilderness expedition, including fieldwork, service, teamwork, character building, and reflection. Our teachers would utilize elements expeditionary learning to structure achievement in outdoor projects.<sup>4</sup>
  - e. Students would make use of technology where applicable throughout the project process and in relationship to community project partners. We foresee technology use in creating presentations, researching, preparing reports, entrepreneurial endeavors (see below) and for advanced study such as graphic and web design.
4. **Skill Development Through a Cooperative Culture:** A sustainable, positive school climate, “fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society.”<sup>5</sup>
- a. At LRNC this cooperative school climate would include:
    - i. A teacher-led and student-centered environment with multi-age, cross-curricular learning.
    - ii. Values and expectations that foster social, emotional and physical well-being for our students and staff.
    - iii. Each student being known, respected and challenged.
    - iv. Students, families and educators working together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared school vision.

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<sup>2</sup> Strobel & van Barneveld, 2009; Walker & Leary, 2009  
<https://www.edutopia.org/pbl-research-annotated-bibliography#strobel>.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.projectfoundry.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> For further information on Expeditionary Learning, see <https://eleducation.org/what-we-offer/our-approach>.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/>.

- b. Students and staff working together to contribute to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment: Students would take on responsibilities aimed at developing practical life and entrepreneurial skills that will serve them into adulthood. Activities we see becoming a part of the Little Red culture are:
- i. **Cooking and Food Preparation:** Large commercial kitchen to accommodate up to 30 students and staff. Students would be responsible for menu planning and food preparation.
  - ii. **Grounds Maintenance:** including, but not limited to, forestry activities, tending gardens, maintaining pathways and outdoor education spaces, tending to environmental needs like snow removal, landscaping and potentially tending animals and bees.
  - iii. **Building and Mechanical Maintenance:** Instead of shop class, children would be able to participate in project-based experiences that contribute to general maintenance. Examples include learning to fix things within the school, building and caring for the outdoor structures and tending to machinery such as tractors and mowers that may be housed on site.
  - iv. **Contributing to working projects around the campus** such as agricultural endeavors like maple syruping, building structures, harvesting wood for woodworking projects, maintaining websites, greeting visitors and taking people on a tour of their school and grounds.

5. **Entrepreneurial Enterprise:** Students and staff would be encouraged to foster an entrepreneurial spirit in all work. Our school would approach entrepreneurship as a way of thinking, with students developing a deeper understanding of academic subject matter by applying their knowledge in a practical, highly engaging context. Projects might include traditional business concepts, like participating in a farmer's market, or social entrepreneurship, such as partnering with local communities relating to nature and food system education. We foresee partnerships with local farmers to develop these projects.

Aspects of the entrepreneurial spirit that we hope to build: Thinking ahead, working across disciplines, developing transferable skills, meeting people, seeking mentors, being in charge of your own destiny, and embracing failure as a vital part of the development process. In addition, students would have the opportunity to utilize technology and build IT skills such as web development, graphic design, database management, and messaging/communications.

6. **Outdoor Education:** Outdoor education supports interdisciplinary learning that builds the capacity for students to become engaged, confident, ethical, and socially conscious individuals. Through wilderness lessons, skill building exercises, adventure outings such as boating or camping and project-based expeditions students would build life, science and cooperative skills that they will carry into their lives after school.

- a. Challenge is good for adolescents. Placed into an environment with a unique physical and social challenge that requires that students adapt to overcome adversity, they develop new skills and competencies that they may have been lacking. This improves self-confidence and willingness to engage in problems and learn new things.<sup>6</sup> Outdoor adventure activities will be an integral part of programming at LRNC.
  - b. Outdoor education provides ample time for physical activity which the Wisconsin DPI, through their “Active Schools Initiative”, has found contributes directly to higher test scores and retention.<sup>7</sup>
  - c. Education theory points to strong social motivation on the part of adolescents. Outdoor education programs and projects, particularly those that are seeking to develop skills, put children into cooperative situations where they develop the skills necessary to work with one another.<sup>8</sup>
  - d. Successful outdoor environmental education programs build on outdoor literacy, confidence, and skill sets in a sequential manner. We will structure our program to incorporate core principles of safety, experience, expedition, investigation, observation and record keeping. We will build on the success of well structured outdoor environmental curriculum like that at Wildlands School in Augusta, WI and the Environmental Education Program undertaken in the Alberta school system.<sup>9</sup>
  - e. The LRNC would play host to many possibilities for special programs directly related to the environment hosted by both LRNC staff as well as visiting community members, environmental educators and more. Special programs could be as short a few hours (for field trips) or as long as weeks (in the event of summer camps/intensives).
7. **Teacher Led:** The instructional program and administrative structure would be designed and implemented by teachers and staff.
- a. Research suggests that over 100 teacher-led schools in 18 states are experiencing great success in public, charter, union, and nonunion districts all across the country. A high percentage of people (teachers included) believe that teacher led schools are a good idea and that teachers should have more autonomy in determining what is best for their students.<sup>10</sup>
  - b. Governance structure can vary, but all teacher-led schools provide more autonomy and stronger sense of vision amongst teachers.<sup>11</sup>
  - c. We foresee having one or more staff members in addition to classroom teachers who could undertake a variety of duties that support the school’s mission and ensure teachers can focus

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<sup>6</sup> Walsh and Gollins, 1976, Ewert 198: <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED525964.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/sspw/pdf/pecore4.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> See <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED525964.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://education.alberta.ca/media/3114964/eoed.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.teacherpowered.org/files/Teacher-Powered-Schools-FAQ-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://neatoday.org/2015/12/02/teacher-led-school-educators-decide-best-students/>.

on student learning. Duties could range from administrative support to arranging nature campus programming to supervising outdoor activities.

8. **Student Engagement Through Ownership Over Learning:** Students would take an active role in their education, selecting projects, determining goals, and taking part in self-assessments under the guidance of instructors. Students would be given time to discover what interests them and the freedom to pursue interests deeply. The goal would be to create passionate, lifelong learners who aren't afraid to try new things, who can be resilient when faced with challenges, who know how to collaborate, and who can take responsibility for themselves and their work product.
  - a. Our district has recognized that “Students who are highly engaged in learning and interact with an engaging teaching staff are most likely to reach their full potential.”<sup>12</sup>
  - b. ECASD survey results show that while 50% of elementary school students are “highly engaged”, that percentage drops to 28% among secondary students.<sup>13</sup>
  - c. Research indicates that students are more engaged at school when they are given developmentally appropriate choices. Being able to exercise choice builds important self-management skills and gives the student ownership over his or her own learning. “When students feel a sense of ownership, they *want* to engage in academic tasks and persist in learning.”<sup>14</sup>
  - d. We believe our proposal to give middle schoolers agency in determining how they will meet academic goals will increase student engagement and, in turn, improve academic outcomes and student satisfaction.
9. **Assessments and Accountability:** We envision this school as a place where everyone can learn. Our staff and students will be accountable to one another and work collaboratively to create a culture of education that meets the needs of all who are involved in LRNC. Assessments will always be viewed as one measure of the commitment we make to our teachers, students, parents, community and governing bodies. As part of the developing program design for LRNC, teachers would work alongside students and families to create alternative measures for recording academic progress and measuring growth and achievement. This would be honed and developed continually by teachers and always with students, families and the ECASD as partners in creating the culture of education and accountability at LRNC.
10. **School Calendar and Schedule:** Classes would be planned in accordance with the latest research on what optimizes learning for the young adult: later start time each day and year round/balanced calendar. We would like our program to limit homework so students will have time to pursue outside interests, engage in family and community life, have “down time”, and get plenty of rest.

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<sup>12</sup> ECASD K12 Insight Student Engagement Survey, Executive Summary (2014) at p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> ECASD Student Engagement Survey results, 2013/14.

<sup>14</sup> McCombs, Barbara, “Developing Responsible and Autonomous Learners: A Key to Motivating Students”, American Psychological Association, available at <http://www.apa.org/education/k12/learners.aspx>.

- a. In a policy statement published in 2014, the American Academy of Pediatrics urged middle and high schools to modify start times as a means to enable students to get adequate sleep and improve their health, safety, academic performance, and quality of life.<sup>15</sup>
- b. Research suggests that balanced school year calendars eliminate summer learning loss and close the achievement gap, honor the whole child by allowing for quicker intervention in academic and social struggles, engage students in continuous learning, contribute to higher attendance and less off-season vandalism and decreases teacher substitution rates.<sup>16</sup>
- c. A year-round calendar would provide staffing at the campus for programming during warmer months, which would be the best utilization of the outdoor space.
- d. A year-round calendar would leave weeks during the traditional school year that the middle school at LRNC would not be in session, freeing up the whole facility and grounds for visiting students to pursue special projects, such as a week-long intensive indoor/outdoor science “nature lab”, “en plein air” art project, nature-based writing intensive, or outdoor safety and recreation course.

11. **Building on Proven Success:** Schools similar to LRNC are popping up across the country and in our own backyard. Within the region there are many schools, both public and private, that are approaching education through project-based learning and active environmental education. Our intention is not “recreate the wheel”, but to build on other schools’ success, combining proven methods in a way that best serves our community. As part of curriculum and program development, staff of LRNC will have opportunity to learn from similar schools, through visits, conferences and workshops, to determine which portions of similar schools we wish to replicate at LRNC. We envision this as a program that will build on the success of multiple schools, innovations and initiatives within the region.

- a. **Wildlands School (Augusta, WI):** Wildlands School is a project-based, science- and research-oriented school that exists as a public charter through the Augusta School District.<sup>17</sup> Wildlands’ model of allowing teachers more autonomy and creative control over academic approaches and measures of success have created a culture of extremely passionate educators, high-achieving students, and parents who recognize the benefit of a real-world, project-based approach to education. Wildlands School serves grades 7-12.
- b. **Valley New School (Appleton, WI):** Founded in 2003, Valley New School utilizes PBL as a vehicle for academic success. Currently, 100% of its students are accepted into a post-secondary institution. Their website has a thorough explanation of “the anatomy of a project”, which gives an idea how LRNC would structure a project, going through proposal,

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<sup>15</sup> Wheaton, Anne G.; Gabrielle A. Ferro; Janet B. Croft; “School Start Times for Middle School and High School Students – United States, 2011–12 School Year”, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (2015), available at: [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6430a1.htm?s\\_cid=mm6430a1\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6430a1.htm?s_cid=mm6430a1_w)

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.nayre.org/research.html>.

<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.wildlandsschool.net/>.

research, planning, production, and evaluation phases.<sup>18</sup> Valley New School “has been designated as a national ‘lab school’ for project-based learning by the Gates-EdVisions organization and, as such, provides an example and leadership in best practices for this learning model.”<sup>19</sup>

- c. **Rockford Middle School - Center for Environmental Studies (Rockford, MN) and others:** Minnesota Department of Education 2011-2013 Initiative to Incorporate Environmental Education into a diverse cross-section of public schools around the state: This initiative resulted in well trained and enthusiastic staff that were able to build, develop and pioneer diverse environmental programs with overwhelming success. Nearly all schools continued to incorporate, support and expand their environmental education programs following the completion of the program.<sup>20</sup> One school in particular experienced such success with implementing environmental education into their traditional program that they continued to grow the program and changed their name from Rockford Middle School to Rockford Middle School - Center for Environmental Studies.<sup>21</sup>
- d. **West Michigan Academy of Environmental Science (Walker, MI):** Voted one of the top 10 Charter Schools in Michigan, the West Michigan Academy of Environmental Science provides a rigorous academic program that marries intense scientific study with outdoor education a progressive K-12 model that builds on independence and creativity throughout Middle School to prepare students for a more collegiate experience during their high-school years.<sup>22</sup>

**WHAT resources are necessary to support your program structure? Consider the following: staff/certifications; technology/material/equipment; district/conventional program supports; budget; timeframe; other.**

We envision that the founders group--those submitting this proposal--would oversee the program development, with specifics left to education professionals. We anticipate working to complete the LEAP Committee application process, gaining support of the school board, publicizing the concept to the community, gaining plenty of community input, conducting an application and interview process to select school leaders, using district support to pursue grants, and hopefully securing startup funding that would provide those selected as staff leaders paid time to design the instructional program. Part of that process would be, of course, determining what building and grounds improvements would be required and seeing those through. We hope that the ECASD finds enough value in this project to provide the ongoing funding to support the program. We anticipate the process would take two years and the goal is for the school to open September 2019.

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<sup>18</sup> See <http://valleynewschool.com/projects/anatomy-of-a-project/>

<sup>19</sup> See <http://valleynewschool.com/projects/>

<sup>20</sup> See [https://www.seek.state.mn.us/sites/default/files/integrating\\_eoe.pdf](https://www.seek.state.mn.us/sites/default/files/integrating_eoe.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> See <http://rms.rockford.k12.mn.us/modules/cms/pages.phtml?pageid=226034&sessionId=7fbf47898f3a25b2e02a9f97b64aa339>.

<sup>22</sup> See <https://www.wma-es.com/>.