

## Using the Sense of Place as a Catalyst for Learning

By John Cobourn, Water Resource Specialist, and  
Heather Segale, Environmental Education Coordinator  
University of Nevada Cooperative Extension

Date: September 30, 2003

An exciting new teaching method has been introduced in Lake Tahoe and Truckee schools over the last two years. It is called place-based learning because it teaches reading, math, social studies and science by focusing on “real world” issues of the local community and natural environment, such as the need to stop erosion and the pollution of Lake Tahoe. Students at various grade levels get involved in trying to solve community problems through service learning projects, such as monitoring water quality or installing best management practices on the school grounds.

By teaching about the place where students live, subjects come alive, and students can connect lessons and activities to their own daily experiences. Students are taught to reflect on the meaning of their school activities in their own lives. The result is that students often become more excited about the topic, are more engaged in the learning process, and do better work on their assignments.

Instead of writing papers only on traditional subjects such as American History, foreign affairs and great books, students can write reports on projects they are working on right in their own neighborhoods. They are making real-world associations to the subjects they are studying. Students don't simply learn about science; they actually do it. For example, they can design a project to test the local stream's water quality, collect and record the data, do the math needed to assess their findings, and interpret the results in written and graphic form.

One of the main goals of place-based learning is to help teachers and students achieve improved results on state-required proficiency exams. In addition, recent studies show that when these methods are incorporated, students become more involved and excited about school, their motivation rises, and discipline problems decline. Their reading, math, and science scores improve, and their personal development as community citizens is enhanced. You can see the mounting evidence of these results reported by the State Environment Education Roundtable ([www.seer.org](http://www.seer.org)), the Corporation for National Service and Service Learning ([www.learningindeed.org](http://www.learningindeed.org)), and in the California Department of Environmental Education in their Education and the Environment report ([www.californiaee.org](http://www.californiaee.org)).

An example of a local placed-based learning project is the illustrated field journals being compiled by students in Karen Martin's sixth-grade class at Sierra Mountain Middle School. The students took a two-day field trip to a local watershed, where they collected data on the water quality and vegetative cover of the stream. A local artist taught them the basics of scientific illustration and nature drawing. The students created renderings of the diverse stream ecosystem, logged their data, and wrote about what they were learning in their nature field journals. They will continue to work on these journals throughout the school year, incorporating examples of their writing, math, science and art skills into their very own books, based on the study of their own neighborhood. Interested

*(Continued on page 2)*



Lake Tahoe Environmental Education Coalition

tahoe.com

UCDAVIS



COOPERATIVE  
EXTENSION  
Bringing the University to You



Watch for "The Lake Tahoe Report" each week and tune in to KOLO-TV News Channel 8 Tuesdays at 5 p.m. "The Lake Tahoe Report" is a collaborative effort of the Lake Tahoe Environmental Education Coalition, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, UC Davis and the USDA Forest Service. For more information, contact Heather Segale, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension, (775) 832-4138, or logon to [www.lteec.org](http://www.lteec.org).

# The Lake Tahoe Report

---

*(Continued from page 1)*

students will also be able to submit their work in a national watershed art and poetry contest, “River of Words.”

A coalition of local and national educators and nonprofits has formed to introduce these new methods and create a support system for teachers who want to incorporate them into their curriculum. The Adopt-A-Watershed nonprofit received a California Proposition 13 grant in 2002 to hire a regional coordinator for schools in Lake Tahoe and Truckee. Sierra Watershed Education Partnerships (SWEP) has taken the lead in introducing the new curricula in the Tahoe-Truckee Unified School District in Placer and Nevada Counties. In the South Shore, Diana Reiner, Jamie Greenough, and Michael St. Michel have been conducting similar projects for years.

The Lake Tahoe Environmental Education Coalition (LTEEC), based in University of Nevada Cooperative Extension’s Incline Village office, is working with several Nevada agencies to form a new coalition to support teachers on the Nevada side of the lake who want to use these methods to enable students to achieve higher levels of academic success. For more details about place-based learning, please call Jill Sarick, regional coordinator, (775) 832-4167.

---