



REPORT: Expanding and Enhancing Environmental Education Through Partnership with Stillwater Area Public Schools

June 22, 2026



Project Overview

In the 2025-26 school year, Belwin expanded its environmental education programming through a new district-wide partnership with Stillwater Area Public Schools (SAPS). In its pilot year, this new partnership provided 2,246 students (and 267 adult teachers and chaperones) with hands-on, standards-aligned, science learning at our new education center.

Goals, outcomes, and feedback

Between September 2025 and May 2026, Belwin's naturalist team conducted 88 in-classroom programs and hosted 66 class field trips for SAPS students at Belwin's Education Site.

The initial plan was to engage 3rd through 5th graders in this pilot year. But as the year progressed, we realized we had capacity for additional in-classroom visits, so we expanded instruction to include 2nd graders. As a result, all 2nd-5th grade students received "push-ins," i.e., classroom presentations introducing them to Belwin and basic scientific concepts they may explore on a field trip.

In addition, all 3rd-5th grade students visited Belwin's Education Site for immersive outdoor field trips.

Typical field trip schedule:

- Greet students, teachers, and chaperones
- Morning introduction
- Themes:
 - o 3rd Grade: Adaptations
 - o 4th/5th Grade: Energy Webs
- Nature walk, exploring, outdoor observations
- Lunch
- Outdoor activities
- Reflection & conclusion

Field trip feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with memorable quotes including, "I didn't know I could have this much fun in nature," from a 4th-grade student, and "the kids really needed this — thank you," from a 5th-grade teacher.

The goal for this pilot year was to develop a program with a smaller subsection of students (third through fifth grades) with the intention of ramping up reach gradually over time. Both parties are committed to growing this partnership in the coming years, starting with adding second graders to on-site visits in 2026-27, and discussing how we may add classroom programs for K-1st graders. As the district grows and changes, we anticipate field trip sizes will also grow. Next school year, to accommodate district needs, we will host approximately 10 combined classes throughout the year, as opposed to the one-class-at-a-time model in 2025-26. To support this growth, Belwin plans to hire a new part-time seasonal naturalist in August 2026, and a part-time intern in 2027.



Students arrive at the Peter J. King Family Foundation Wetlands Center to kick off a day of outdoor observations

Building a new partnership

Historically, Stillwater students were only included in education programs at Belwin as scheduling allowed (about 250 students each year). This school year, we built a new comprehensive environmental learning program that is integrated throughout all elementary schools in the district, with potential for reaching every elementary student in the district each year.

This pilot year focused on program development and delivery, including:

- Belwin's hire of a new full-time environmental education manager and one part-time naturalist.
- Purchase of program supplies like skulls, furs, binoculars, magnifying glasses, ID books, notebooks, pencils, etc.
- Setting up systems for custodial supplies and services
- Establishing norms and schedules for program delivery, program review, and feedback
- Careful oversight from SAPS and Belwin leadership



Max Borge, Belwin's Environmental Education Manager, instructs 5th graders from Afton/Lakeland Elementary

Key Learnings

As with any new partnership, there were things to be learned. Key takeaways included:

- Develop efficient communication practices — we could not assume that classroom teachers have gotten fully briefed by the district beforehand, so we expanded the level of communication to teachers
- Be flexible, adaptable, and empathetic working with partners
- Address student concerns and fears about the outdoors
- Provide options for students to explore trails and indulge curiosity
- Align our practice with our goal: To create positive emotional connections with nature, regardless of students' prior experience and levels of engagement

Gallery

