



Explorers



Blue Sky Fund
EXPLORERS PROGRAM | ANNUAL
2015-2016 | REPORT



Dear Friends and Supporters of Blue Sky,

This year, 917 urban students from eight different Richmond Public Elementary Schools went on monthly, outdoor, experiential field investigations from September to May, thanks to your help! Our students traveled over 429 miles by bus to 12 different sites in the City of Richmond and the surrounding region. They saw crabs, fish, and shrimp in the York River, caught bugs and explored meadows in the local James River Park System, and crossed the mighty James River by footbridge. This report will share some of our year with you through all the investigations, explorations, and adventures we had.

Each month, we held both 3rd and 5th grade field investigations. In response to teacher feedback, we offered our initial field investigation on school grounds instead of off-site. We took advantage of the natural environment around each school, with the hopes of encouraging teachers to use their own outdoor classrooms later in the year. We enjoyed getting to meet students in their school context, and teachers and students alike enjoyed sharing their classrooms with us. Ms. Coward, a teaching veteran of 30 years, expressed her appreciation for the program in this way: "My students respect their educators. They have done a great job handling this group, and I feel completely comfortable with them in charge."

In addition to our partnership with RPS, we continue to see good fruit coming from our ongoing partnership with the Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens. Our 5th graders traveled there for some hands-on exploration into the value of trees and were even able to taste test fresh veggies from the children's garden! Since many do not have regular access to fresh fruits and vegetables, we were excited to hear one George Mason student ask, "Can we go back to that garden? That purple kale is off the chain!" We value the garden's shared commitment to outdoor education and to getting youth excited about the natural world around them.

We celebrated the 100th birthday of the National Park Service by exploring the historic grounds of Tredegar Ironworks and its many simple machines. Students were able to use microscopes to examine moss at the Roslyn Retreat Center to better visualize the complex world of cells. Through these experiences, we saw transformation not only in students' increasing engagement with the natural environment, but also in their teachers' use of experiential education methods. We offered to share our digital microscope with teachers and a team of teachers used it for several weeks after our trip. As research shows, the single biggest predictor of field investigation success is teacher engagement. Through empowering our partner teachers with additional resources and curriculum ideas, we further reinforce the concepts their students learn through our field investigations and deepen our impact on the schools.

A year in review would not be complete without acknowledging some of our other partners. We are fortunate to partner with Pocahontas State Park, Joseph Bryan Park, and The University of Richmond's Lora Robins Gallery. Each provided a unique insight into a variety of topics including animal adaptations, the water cycle, and geology. In addition, several scientists lent their expertise, including Dr. Ben Ramage of Randolph Macon and Ranger John Gresham of York River State Park.

Our host sites, expert partners, and volunteers help make these transformational experiences possible. Please take a few moments to learn more about our program this year and thank you for your continued support of Blue Sky!

-The Explorers Staff





Mission

To provide transformational experiences for urban youth through outdoor education

EXPLORERS is built on partnership with the **Richmond Public Schools**, specifically those that support a large portion of low-income students. Blue Sky Fund provided eight outdoor field investigations for 3rd grade students and seven outdoor field investigations for 5th grade students.

Goals:

- Providing **hands-on instruction** that focuses on nature and the opportunity to explore in a safe and nurturing environment.
- Teaching **experiential lessons** that directly support 3rd and 5th Grade Science SOL requirements.
- Supporting teachers by providing **relevant experiences** and lessons that augment their classroom teaching.
- Developing **core values and character traits** in students that relate to classroom behaviors & social skills, environmental stewardship, academic success and resilience skills.



2015-2016
Richmond Public Schools
EXPLORERS Partners:

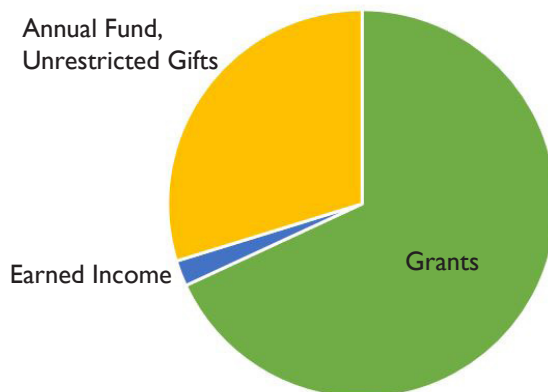
- Bellevue
- Blackwell
- Chimborazo
- Fairfield Court
- George Mason
- Miles Jones
- Oak Grove - Bellmeade
- Woodville

During the 2015-2016 school year, we worked with eight elementary schools for 3rd grade and five of those schools for 5th grade, **bringing our total reach to 917 students.**

Budget

Revenue*:

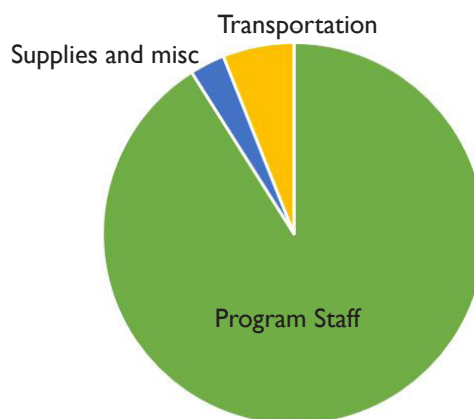
Altria Companies Employee Community Fund	15,000
CarMax Foundation	19,405
Dominion Foundation	7,500
ERM Group Foundation	6,782
Memorial Foundation for Children	15,000
Pauley Family Foundation	25,000
Richmond Kiwanis Foundation	4,000
Earned Income	2,922
Annual Fund, Unrestricted gifts	40,511
Total	\$136,120



Cost of Explorers **per school**: \$10,471
 Cost of Explorers **per student**: \$148
 Cost of Explorers **per student, per field trip**: \$18.55 / third grade
 \$21.21 / fifth grade

Expenses*:

Program Staff	123,907
Supplies and misc.	4,027
Transportation	8,186
Total	\$136,120



*Revenue and Expenses for July 2015 - June 2016





Explorers

Evaluation

The Explorers program utilizes three types of evaluation in order to better adapt our program to community needs, remain accountable to our partners, and measure our impact:

1. **Grades:** Programmatic impact on students' understanding of Virginia Science standards is measured by comparing first quarter science grades with last quarter grades for the 2015-2016 school year.

69.5%

of students improved their science grades over the course of the school year OR maintained a B or above

58.7%

of 5th grade students passed their science SOL test

2. **Teacher Evaluations:** Our goal of supporting teachers through experiential learning is measured through on-site teacher evaluations rating several aspects of the Explorers program including their own use of our experiential curriculum and lesson plans.

99.8%

of teachers said their students had a positive experience with the natural environment

95.3%

of teachers referred back to Blue Sky lessons in their own classrooms

100%

- of field trips were Science SOL correlated
- of teachers felt the SOL objectives were presented well by our Educator staff
- of teachers would recommend the Explorers program to others

3. **Student Perceptions:** We aim to positively enhance students' perception of the natural environment (as an indicator of potential environmental stewardship in their lifetime) and evaluate this through analysis of student drawings. We compare how students perceive the environment at the beginning and end of the school year and quantify how certain aspects of their drawings change based on our field trips.



Student Perceptions

Beginning of Year

Use 3 words to describe the environment:

1. grass
2. soil
3. leaves

Draw the Environment



Use 3 words to describe the environment:

1. Cars
2. houses
3. people

Draw the Environment



After analyzing the drawings we received at the end of the year:

- 4 out of 5 students included plants in their end of the year drawings
- The presence of manmade objects fell 21% by the end of the year
- Wildlife representations nearly doubled from 22% to 41% and the presence of water more than doubled from 10% to 23%

End of Year

Use 3 words to describe the environment:

1. nature
2. grass
3. soil

Draw the Environment



Use 3 words to describe the environment:

1. we saw flowers and bees
2. water game
3. looking at plants

Draw the Environment



A picture may be worth a thousand words, but we wanted to know what words students would choose to describe their environment when given the option and required to be selective. In addition to their drawings, we asked each student to write just three words they would use to describe the environment and to answer some questions about it. Students reflected something of the dignity and adversity in their own daily life experiences in the environment. **In the fall, we saw words like dirty, trashy, and nasty.** Miley, a 5th grade student, described having a good environment but added, "things people do to it is ridiculous!" Corey also represented a city at the beginning of the year that was "big" and "awesome" while being filled with streets and homes. Among the top words used at the beginning of the year were trees, grass, big, houses, school, and people. **By the end of the year, Miley used the words "nature, pure, and peace"** to describe her environment, and **Corey had drawn a detailed picture of Shalom Farms complete with chickens and hoop houses!** As we enter our 9th year of the Explorers program, we are starting to see fifth grade students with a positive association of the natural environment based on their experience with us in 3rd grade. **We are excited to see how expanding to 2nd & 4th grades will deepen their experience even more!**



Explorers

Partnerships

Community Partner Highlights

The University of Richmond, Lora Robins Gallery – Served as a host site, collaborated on lesson planning/co-taught lessons, and provided access to Massive Rocks and Minerals Exhibit

Tredegar Ironworks, National Park Service – Served as a host site, facilitated lesson on grid mapping with 3rd grade students, and encouraged students to take advantage of free access to National Parks as 4th graders

Roslyn Retreat Center – Served as a host site, allowed us use of facilities and were incredibly flexible in adjusting to weather related issues



Venue Partners

James River Park System
Joseph Bryan Park
Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens
Pocahontas State Park
Poor Farm Park
Roslyn Retreat Center
Shalom Farms
Tredegar Ironworks, National Park Service
University of Richmond, Lora Robins Gallery
York River State Park

Grant Partners

Altria Companies Employee Community Fund
CarMax Foundation
Dominion Foundation
ERM Group Foundation
Memorial Foundation for Children
The Pauley Family Foundation
Richmond Kiwanis Foundation
The Robins Foundation
Virginia Environmental Endowment

Educators

Treffery Brock	Paige Trivett
Dustin Parks	Maggie John
Liana Elguero	Martha Wingfield
Janina Peppers	Jennifer Kuykendall
Janissa Hamilton	Walt Wroblewski
Aimee Selleck	Paula Labieniec
Megan Holland	



Thank You!



Testimonials

"It has become impossible for us to afford the amount of field trips that Blue Sky Fund offers...I give my full support to Blue Sky Fund and know that there would be a large gap in programming if the program were to end."

- Sandra Wheeler, Community Partnerships
Coordinator, Richmond Public Schools



"Exploring nature is really cool!"

- George Mason 3rd grader

When asked to rate their day from 1-10 after a Blue Sky field investigation, one 3rd grade Blackwell student said, "Mine is 20,000!" Another followed up with "Mine's the biggest number there is!"



"I never want to leave, I love Blue Sky trips!"

- Woodville 5th grader

3rd Grade student Joke:

Q: Why does the decomposer get invited to all the parties?

A: Because it's always breaking down!



While looking at and talking about moss and fungi, "you will now remember this because we have seen it!"

- Chimborazo 5th grade teacher



Explorers

Future Growth

We are humbled by the great support we've received this year. We utilized 12 different sites and saw over 900 students on our monthly field investigations. We developed a new partnership with the University of Richmond, continued to explore and collaborate with repeat partners, and continued to solidify our position in Richmond as a leading organization providing transformational, outdoor, education experiences. We are so grateful for ways the community sees our value, too; evidenced by our successful crowd-funding campaign (aptly named "Blue Skies Ahead") in which we raised \$63,839 to go towards the expansion of the Explorers program.

In keeping with our strategic plan, we are moving forward with our Explorers program expansion during the 2016-2017 school year. This school year, we'll be providing monthly field investigations to an estimated 1,600 students every month, due in large part to your help and the help of our granting organizations. With all five public elementary schools in the East End of Richmond, we will now start with students in 2nd grade and be able to provide them consistent, high-quality, outdoor science investigations until the time they graduate elementary school! In addition, we will add 5th grade programming to our three current school partners in the Southside of Richmond.

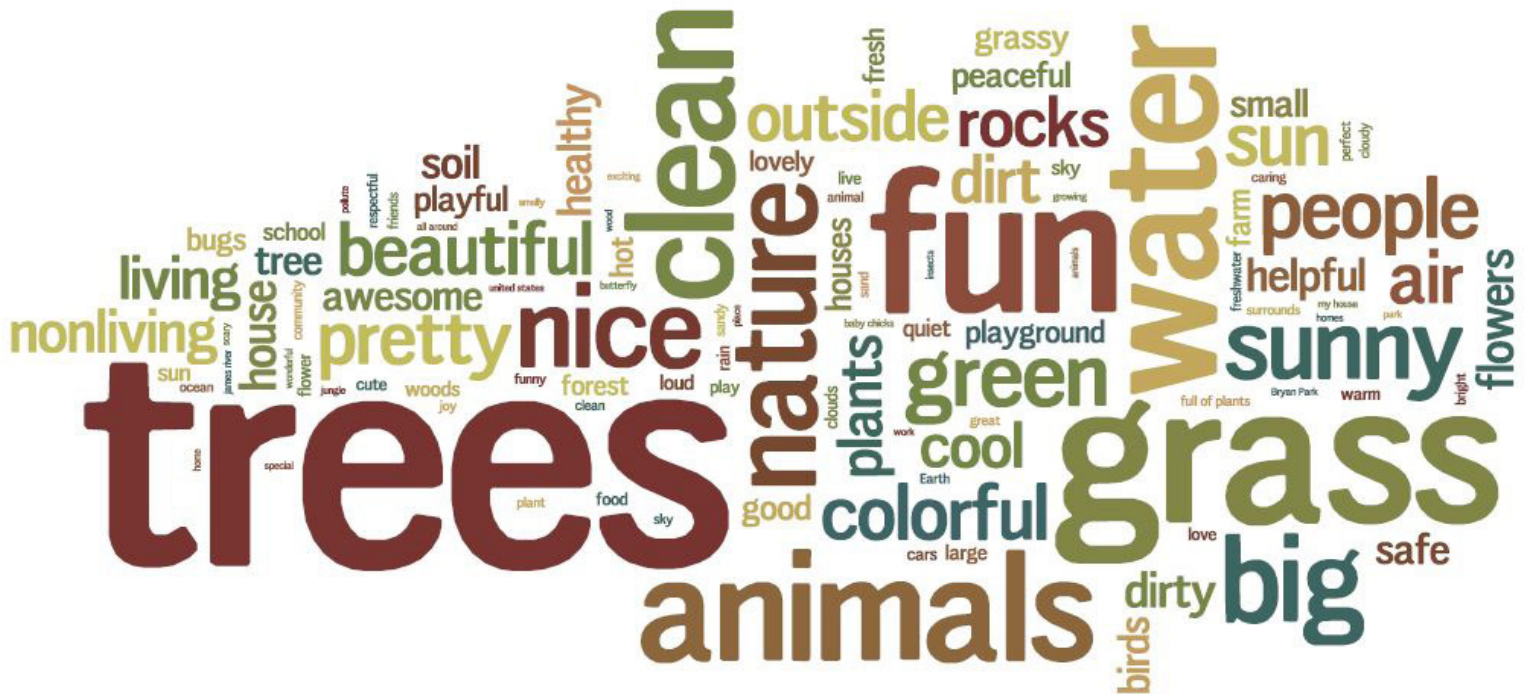
While there may be other organizations that provide a similar service in environmental education, what makes Blue Sky Fund and our Explorers program unique is a desire to develop students holistically and impact schools through teacher training and professional development. We aim not just to build students' cognitive abilities in science but also to impact their soft skills, like resilience. Our students often come to us having some adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). These experiences can be a one-time event or prolonged exposure to stress/negative influences and behavior. In the end ACEs can lead to long-term impacts including decreased brain development, increased exhibition of risky behavior, and more. Fortunately for us and for our students, these ACEs can be overcome by the presence of resilience skills, which can be learned and, therefore, taught. In an interview with Orion Magazine, Richard Louv cites research about the relationship between stress and nature: "The research...shows the experience (in natural settings) helps reduce negative stress and protects psychological well-being, especially in children undergoing the most stressful life events." We continue to utilize games, initiatives, and exposure to the natural environment to develop resilience skills in students and are honored to be part of a larger movement to make Richmond a more trauma-informed community and to support our students and teachers with positive experiences in nature.

Sincerely,
Charles Johnson
Academic Program Manager



Reflections

At the end of the year, we reflected on our work, and we cannot help but feel encouraged. We have been a part of and a witness to positive transformation in the lives of our students. What an honor and a privilege! We'll leave you with this word cloud of students' descriptions of the environment at the end of the year. The more times a word appeared on our students' assessments, the bigger the word appears in the word cloud. We were delighted to see words like trees, grass, fun, water, animals, clean, and nature. We invite you to enjoy their thoughts on the environment and to come explore with us!



What words would **you** use?





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