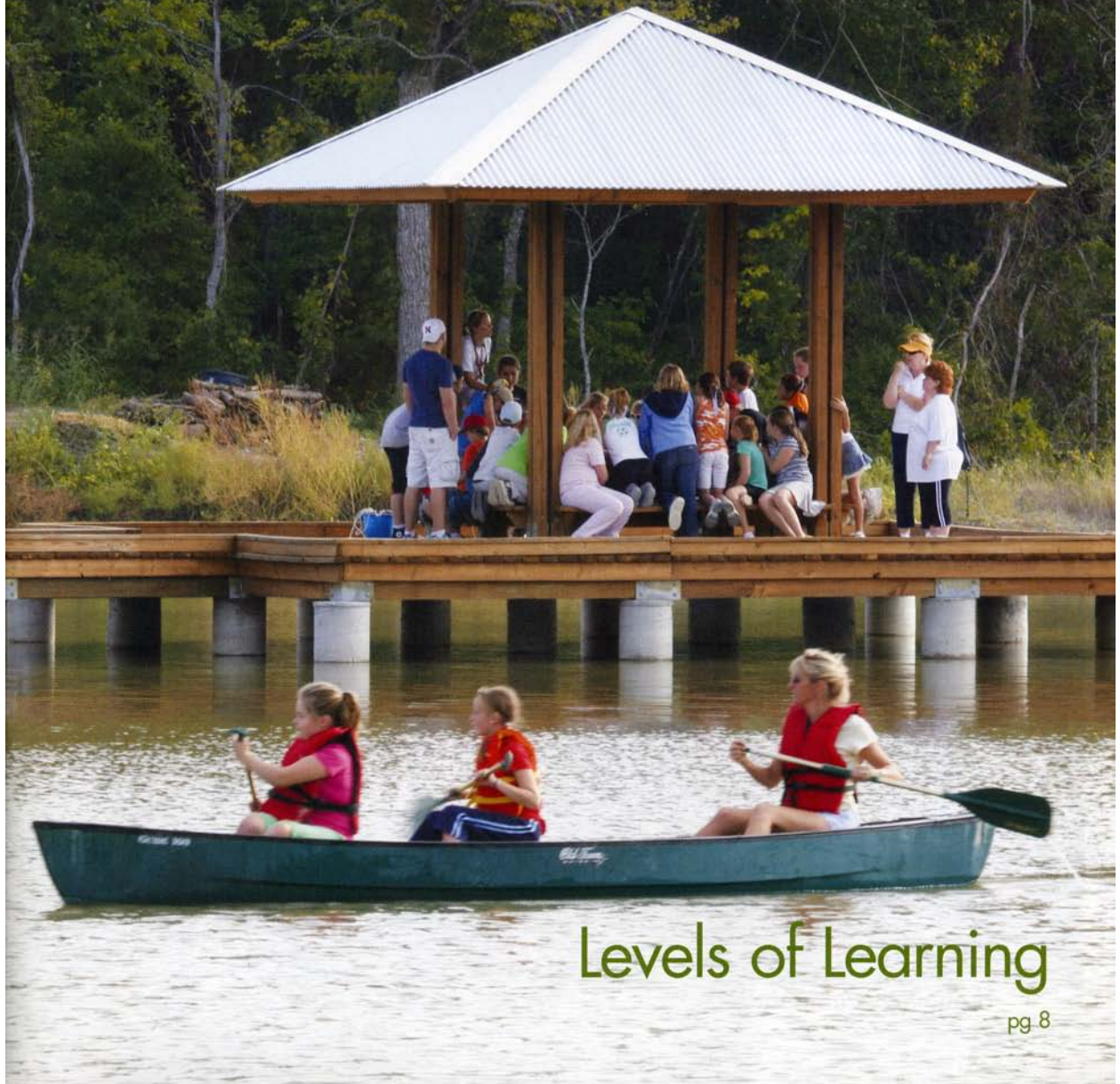


CONTOURS

A PUBLICATION OF MESA VOLUME 1 • ISSUE 1 • 2006

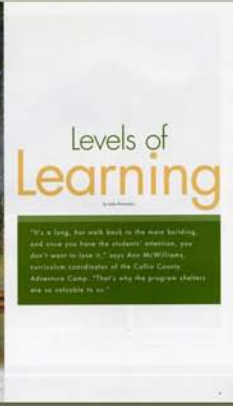


Levels of Learning

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CONTOURS



Levels of Learning

by Leslie Richardson

"It's a long, hot walk back to the main building, and once you have the students' attention, you don't want to lose it," says Ann McWilliams, curriculum coordinator of the Collin County Adventure Camp. "That's why the program shelters are so valuable to us."



"Students' awareness of the earth and its health isn't just 'the rainforest over there,' but here, where they are living."

The program shelters provide table surfaces where students can take notes and conduct experiments. On the walls are interpretive panels that can be changed to accommodate the season and the lessons. The shelters are also designed to catch the prevailing breezes and provide much-needed shade.

In 2003, Collin County and the Greater Dallas YMCA partnered with local environmentalists and the school districts to provide this overnight camp for students. Located on 456 acres in Westminister, Texas, Collin County Adventure Camp provides a unique opportunity for children to interact with nature. The program shelters are "learning spots" placed carefully among various ecosystems and habitats.

On this warm morning, students lie on their stomachs on the boardwalk and scoop up water samples from Lindberg Lake. They then take those samples a few feet away to the microscopes, pill chemistry kits and other tools in the program shelter. On the wall are color-coded sheets to help the young scientists determine what the chemical results mean.

The students also study the water's health by looking at macroinvertebrates — larval stages of insects. Certain species indicate good water quality. Others indicate high pollution. Charts in the program shelters help students identify the macroinvertebrates they see under the microscopes.

On the walls are maps that show how, through a series of creeks, the water on this property continues down the watershed and into Lake Lavon Reservoir. Lake Lavon provides drinking water to much of North Texas.

"Students can see how the ecosystem directly affects human beings, themselves included," McWilliams says. "Ultimately, what we're trying to do here is cultivate good citizens."

The instructive panels on the shelter walls also inform other visitors to the camp. Visitors agree that there is a kind of natural "flow" enabled by the trail system and program shelters. This experience reflects the amount of thought and research that was put into every aspect of the camp's master plan.

Mike Frazee, of the landscape architecture firm MESA, explains, "A series of layered environmental system studies — documenting soil types, hydrological patterns, vegetation zones, wildlife habitats and topography — helped us create 'development sensitivity' overlays. We designed the trail system, the program shelters and everything else to answer those zones, which broke into distinct areas, almost like rooms in a home."

In the forest, another program shelter provides a place to study earthworms, soil and nutrients. "There are many layers of leaf litter here," McWilliams says. "Students use a cylindrical plug and bore through the humus layer of the soil. Layer by layer, they can see all the stages of decay, down to the veins of the leaves."

One of the two Blackland Prairie shelters is tucked right into the prairie grasses. The roof provides some camouflage, so the birds aren't frightened away by the activity of the students below.

"Students get to see a lot of bird activity because the shelter is so well designed," McWilliams says. "The children sit down and feel the wind blowing through the grasses. They observe for themselves flowers, insects and animals that make up the prairie."

"Students' awareness of the earth and its health isn't just 'the rainforest over there,' but here, where they are living," McWilliams says. "We hope their experiences here help them realize they can do something to preserve their immediate environment."