

The History of West Woods

Unity West Elementary School

West Woods is a unique outdoor environmental classroom on the campus of Unity West Elementary School in Tolono, Illinois. West Woods was established in the fall of 2004 with the planting of more than one hundred trees in the southeast corner of the school's campus, but the seeds of West Woods were planted within the minds of the local education community long before the completion of the school itself. Planning for West Woods began in 2000 even though Unity West would not open until the fall of 2002. It was in 2000 that a group of teachers from Unity West's predecessors, the Tolono,



Sadorus, and Pesotum Grade Schools, attended a three-day workshop presented by the Champaign County Forest Preserve staff at the Middle Fork Forest Preserve. As these teachers spent the night camping in the forest, they discussed ways that environmental education could be incorporated at the planned Unity West campus. This core group of teachers began a dialogue among the school staff that led to the formation of the basic concept of West Woods. The project was designed to be a

long lasting learning environment whose growth and maintenance would be dependent on the efforts of every student in the school. Each student would develop a sense of ownership and stewardship in not only the Unity West campus but also the natural history of Champaign County.

A selection of trees native to Champaign County was chosen through the collaborative efforts of both the school staff and the Champaign County Forest Preserve. The Forest Preserve staff also conducted classroom presentations focusing on tree structure, species identification, and the role of trees in healthy ecosystems. On September 29 and 30, 2004, the entire school community participated in planting, watering, staking, and mulching the trees that would form



West Woods. In the fall of each year since 2004 the school has conducted a West Woods Workday. This day provides each new kindergarten class as well as all students new to the school with the opportunity to participate in the growth of West Woods by planting new trees; all students take part in the maintenance of West Woods by helping to weed, water, and mulch the existing trees. The students' continuing involvement in the project allows them to gain a sense of pride and ownership in this educational community resource. As the forest matures it will become not only a natural habitat for a wide variety of plants and animals, but also an educational resource for both the students of Unity West and the entire southwest Champaign County community.