

Chesapeake Elementary archer Destiny Emonds takes aim.



→ Take a Bow ←

Students learn confidence and discipline through archery.

WRITTEN BY J. KENDALL PERKINSON



TOP Justin Ward, left, and Joshua Adkins return arrows to their quivers in preparation for another round of shots.



BOTTOM Jackson Wilson, left, helps Madison Black score her shots while Brayden Hunter counts his own score.



A

fter six years working at Chesapeake Elementary School, guidance counselor Stephen Erskine was looking to try something new. He wanted to introduce a dynamic activity that

would appeal to as many students as possible but also build character, social engagement, and physical skill.

He did not realize it at the time, but the state Division of Natural Resources had started a statewide experiment to bring archery to public schools in 2004. Eighteen schools introduced archery as part of physical education classes for students from 4th to 12th grade. Each school taught at least 10 hours of archery that year, though many opted for more.

West Virginia was only the third state in the nation to adopt the curriculum and, in 2005, became the first state in the nation to introduce the program to schools for the deaf and blind. In 2006, DNR organized the state's first Archery in Schools tournament. By the time Erskine discovered the program, it had already become an overwhelming success.

Erskine had no experience with archery. In fact, he had never picked up a bow before. But he learned about the evidence of the sport's personal and academic benefits. Early signs seemed to indicate that students who participated in the program were seeing improvements in concentration at school, social interaction, and participation in outdoor activities. "As I researched more into it, I thought it would fit very well as part of my counseling," he says.



On Target

Most sports test physical strength and endurance, giving the strongest and fastest students a significant edge. But archery relies more on subtle skills like focus, stillness, hand-eye coordination, fine muscle control, and breathing regulation. "You'll have someone who doesn't really have a place in other sports come in and shoot an almost perfect score on the archery range," Erskine says. "It doesn't matter if you are an inherent athlete or if this is the first sport you've ever participated in. Everyone is given an equal chance."

In this way, the program can also expand students' social circles. Kids who have never really fit in with any particular group often find a new place to belong. "Archery incorporates students of any income level, any gender, any skill level. They can be somebody who is athletic, or someone who doesn't play any other sports at all."

Before he could begin teaching archery at his school, Erskine had to take up the hobby himself. The National Archery in Schools Program, the parent of the West Virginia program, requires every adult interacting with students to be trained and certified in safety and basic instruction.

As he practiced, Erskine liked that he could see his own progress as he gradually sent arrows closer and closer to the bullseye. It only affirmed his conviction that the program would be perfect for students. "I thought, if I as an adult feel a positive return from this sport, I definitely want to share this with my students so they can have this positive feeling, too—that they accomplished something for themselves and as part of a team," he says.

This is another factor that makes archery different from most other sports. There is exactly one person affecting the outcome of any archer's performance—themselves. Yet, in team competition, scores from each individual archer are combined, transforming that personal growth into a group outcome.

Bullseye

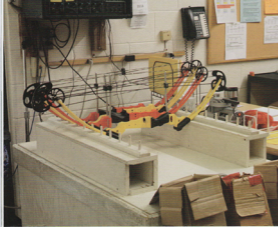
Today, the NASP has more than 300 participating schools in West Virginia alone and has trained more than 18 million students in basic archery around the nation. In 2017, the group sent out surveys to thousands of its participants, revealing that the sport's benefits do indeed reach beyond archery itself. Almost 60 percent reported that the class helped them feel more connected to their school. More than 40 percent said archery made them want to work harder in the classroom. About 65 percent





CLICKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Guidance counselor Stephen Erskine started Chesapeake Elementary School's archery program in 2010 as a way to increase students' discipline and confidence. Jackson Wilson draws back his bow. To Erskine's knowledge, his school is the only one to use three-dimensional targets in its archery program. Erskine gives instructions during archery team practice.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: bows wait in a rack outside Chesapeake Elementary's gymnasium. Brayden Hunter scores his shots. Kathleen Adkins lets an arrow fly. Justin Ward makes his shot.



said that their archery experience influenced them to participate in other outdoor activities.

Conservationists throughout the county have been sounding alarm bells for several years about the stark decreases in the number of hunters—particularly because the hunting industry is a major source of funding for state wildlife agencies. The archery in schools program seems to help with this problem. Although nearly half of students had not touched a bow and arrow before joining the program, about 18 percent said they tried their hand at bow hunting because of their participation in archery in schools. The program has been so successful that, in the coming year, DNR will begin working to introduce archery into West Virginia's public high schools.

The archery program has been just as successful at Chesapeake as it has elsewhere. Erskine says he's seen these benefits with his own eyes. Dozens of his students, now use their birthday money and Christmas wish lists to get personal archery equipment.

Chesapeake Elementary now has more than 25 archery students each year on its elite traveling team. The school has participated in more than 85 competitions in seven states since Erskine started the program in 2010. "For this little community of ours, it's broadened them in opportunities, in places they've gone to, and in world experiences and ideas that wouldn't have been opened to them in other ways," Erskine says of the tournaments.

The program has also allowed Chesapeake students to help people outside their community. Last year, the team took home the NASIP's national award for community service after using a tournament to raise money for St. Jude Children's Hospital and a neonatal hospital in Saskatchewan, Canada.

But Erskine suspects students' favorite aspect of the archery program remains getting the best score in class. "They love to beat me," he says. "They get very proud of that." The program has been so successful that, in the coming year, DNR will begin working to introduce archery into West Virginia's public high schools. ♣



For more information about enrolling a school in the state's Archery in Schools Program, contact Kayla Donathan at the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources at 304.558.2771 or kayla.m.donathan@wv.gov.