



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: Tuesday, April 7, 2026.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. Contact **Gage Harter** with any questions.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Chesterfield County

Program Title: School Partnership with County Govt - Creating Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences

Program Category: Education & Parks and Recreation

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

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Title: Chesterfield Co Public Schools Deputy Superintendent

Signature: 

Chesterfield County, VA

Partnership between Chesterfield Parks and Recreation and CCPS Elementary School Science:
Creating Meaningful Watershed Educational Experiences
(Education & Parks and Recreation Category)

Executive Summary:

Watershed Stewardship through Intergovernmental Partnership is a collaborative initiative between Chesterfield County Public Schools and Chesterfield Parks and Recreation that ensures every elementary student has access to a rigorous Meaningful Watershed Educational Experience (MWEE). Launched in 2024–25 and building on planning efforts from 2023–24, the program integrates standards-aligned classroom instruction, in-class investigations, professional learning for teachers, and field experiences at county parks and regional environmental centers. To date, 1,000 4th Grade students from 30 elementary schools, 4,000 K-5 additional students and 42 teachers have participated across 42 elementary schools. The program directly supports Virginia’s environmental literacy requirements and the 2025 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement. Measurable outcomes include a 98% increase in teacher confidence delivering watershed instruction, 97% willingness to implement shared lessons and resources, and significant student growth on pre/post 4th grade watershed assessments (average increase from 6.4 to 7.43). This partnership model expands access, eliminates financial barriers, and builds long-term instructional capacity across the county.

Problem or need addressed by the program:

Virginia’s Environmental Literacy requirements and the 2025 Chesapeake Bay Watershed Agreement call for every student to participate in at least one rigorous Meaningful Watershed Educational Experience (MWEE) during elementary school. Prior to this initiative, many schools faced barriers to implementation, including transportation costs, field trip fees, limited access to natural spaces, and insufficient teacher training in inquiry-based environmental instruction.

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In 2023–24, limited grant funding allowed only 11 schools to participate in watershed field experiences. As a large and geographically diverse school division serving 41 elementary schools, Chesterfield County recognized that without coordinated intergovernmental collaboration, equitable access to high-quality watershed education would remain inconsistent.

Transportation costs alone often prevented schools—particularly those serving economically disadvantaged communities—from participating in offsite environmental learning. Additionally, teachers reported limited confidence in delivering complex watershed and environmental sustainability standards aligned to Virginia Earth’s Resources and Living Systems Science Standards.

To address these gaps, Chesterfield County Public Schools and Chesterfield Parks and Recreation developed a coordinated, cross-departmental model that leveraged Chesterfield County Parks Rockwood Nature Center facilities, environmental educators, curricular resources, and grant funding to remove financial barriers. By offering no-cost field experiences, in-class investigations, and sustained professional development, the partnership ensures all students, regardless of school location or economic status, have access to authentic, standards-aligned watershed education.

This initiative fulfills state environmental literacy mandates while strengthening county-wide collaboration to meet shared educational and environmental goals.

Program Description:

The program was strategically expanded in the 2024-25 school year following an initial 2023-24 pilot serving 11 schools. Through coordinated planning between Chesterfield County Public

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Schools and Chesterfield Parks and Recreation, the initiative was scaled to serve 32 of 41 elementary schools in its first full implementation year, with participation offered to all 41 schools.

The program targets fourth-grade students and aligns directly with Virginia Science Standard 4.8 (Earth's Resources- which focus on our VA watershed). Each participating school received:

- Three in-person professional development sessions (2 hours each) for fourth-grade teachers
- One optional 3-hour K–5 professional learning session
- One in-class watershed investigation facilitated by environmental educators
- One no-cost field experience at Rockwood Nature Center or regional partners (Maymont, Pocahontas State Park, James River Association)

Parks and Recreation provided environmental educators, curriculum resources, instructional materials, and waived field trip fees (normally \$30 per class). CCPS funded transportation and classroom materials through a Title IV grant, ensuring zero cost to schools and families.

To accommodate the size of the division, parks divided participating schools geographically, with each site serving 7-10 schools. This distributed model maximized personnel capacity while maintaining instructional quality.

During the School year 2024-25, in total, 4,655 fourth-grade students and teachers participated in watershed-focused experiences across classroom instruction, field investigations, and professional learning.

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The partnership model ensures sustainability by embedding watershed instruction into the existing curriculum framework, building teacher leadership capacity, and leveraging multiple environmental organizations to serve a large student population.

For 2025-26, field experiences and K–5 professional development will continue through county collaboration, with plans to pursue Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) funding to expand participation to all 42 elementary schools and reach every fourth-grade student annually.

Program Cost:

The 2024-25 expansion was funded through an approximately \$57,000 Title IV grant awarded to Chesterfield County Public Schools. Funds supported transportation, classroom materials for all elementary schools (including those unable to attend field trips), and costs associated with partner sites that did not waive fees.

Operating costs included approximately \$1,500 for transportation to Rockwood Nature Center, approximately \$5,000 for instructional equipment and watershed investigation materials (\$2,000 on consumable products and 3,000 of that being capital costs for permanent materials.) Field trip fees (typically \$30 per class) were waived by Parks and Recreation, representing significant in-kind cost savings as well as professional development and environmental educator staffing were provided in-kind by Chesterfield Parks and Recreation.

Additional bus transportation, operational costs and curricular materials to regional park sites totaled approximately \$50,000.00.

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To replicate this program division-wide for all 42 elementary schools, estimated annual operational costs would total approximately \$40,000 for transportation, in-class and field experiences, and \$20,000 for capital costs of classroom materials and professional development. With some partnerships offering discounted or waived fees for title 1 schools, this cost-sharing partnership model maximizes county resources while eliminating financial barriers for schools and families.

Results/Success of the Program:

The program has engaged 6,608 students and teachers across 41 elementary schools just within Chesterfield Parks and Rec's relationship with Rockwood Park Nature Center, with all 30 participating fourth-grade schools completing full watershed field investigations and student action components in various parks reaching an additional 4,655 4th grade students.

Student learning outcomes demonstrate measurable impact. A pre- and post-assessment administered to 2,391 fourth-grade students showed:

- Average score increase from 6.4 to 7.43
- Median score increase from 7/10 to 8/10

These gains reflect improved understanding of watersheds, water conservation, and environmental stewardship.

Teacher outcomes were equally significant:

- 98% reported increased confidence teaching watershed standards
- 97% indicated willingness to implement shared lessons

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- 100% reported increased confidence using new instructional resources

Teachers consistently rated professional development as valuable and aligned to classroom instruction.

Teacher feedback highlights program success:

- “The interactive in-class watershed lesson and field trip were excellent. My students were very engaged.”
- “I learned more about watersheds and could better answer student questions.”
- “It didn’t add more work to my already busy schedule, which was a huge benefit.”
- “Please do not ever stop doing this incredible experience for my students.”

Beyond engagement, the program strengthens readiness for fifth-grade science standards.

Living Systems and Earth’s Resources account for approximately 40% of the Grade 5 Science SOL assessment. By providing hands-on, real-world watershed investigations in fourth grade, students build foundational knowledge that supports long-term academic success.

The partnership has also strengthened collaboration between county agencies, demonstrating how coordinated planning can remove barriers, expand access, and meet state environmental literacy mandates effectively and equitably.

Worthiness of Award:

This initiative is innovative because it moves beyond isolated field trips to create a fully integrated, standards-aligned environmental literacy system supported by intergovernmental partnership.

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Rather than offering a single event experience, the program includes sustained professional learning, in-class investigations, structured field experiences, and student-led environmental action. Instruction is embedded directly within Virginia Science Standards and aligned to Chesapeake Bay Watershed requirements.

The distributed park model is particularly innovative. By coordinating multiple county and regional environmental organizations, the county maximizes personnel capacity to serve a large school division. No single park could serve all 42 elementary schools independently; however, through intentional collaboration, the partnership ensures scalable access.

This model demonstrates how counties can leverage cross-departmental expertise to simultaneously:

- Improve educational outcomes
- Meet environmental policy mandates
- Maximize public resources
- Build sustainable instructional systems

Watershed Stewardship through Intergovernmental Partnership exemplifies effective intergovernmental cooperation that directly benefits children and youth while strengthening community stewardship. It represents a replicable, cost-effective model worthy of recognition as a 2025 Achievement Award recipient.

Supplemental Materials:

[Title IV -Elementary Environmental Literacy Grant 2024-25-End of Year Report](#) - This document summarizes our 4th grade Environmental Literacy program to include data, pictures and

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testimonials. This does not include all K-5 programs that Chesterfield Parks and Recreations:
Rockwood Nature Center provided our CCPS students and staff.

