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*Student's Vision Becomes Reality*

*The Power of Student Voice*

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## **Abstract**

This article highlights the process that a student followed to design and launch the Nature's Children Program in Salisbury, North Carolina. The journey began with a local submission to the Daughters of the American Revolution essay contest, which catapulted into a nationally publicized event involving fifth and seventh grade classes in the Rowan-Salisbury School District. Details of how this student's idea progressed from a vision to reality is explained step-by-step. Due to the success of this program, Nature's Children has grown into an event that will include a national park experience.

What happens when a student is inspired by an essay prompt and related reading activities? What happens when her essay does not just receive a grade, but instead she is encouraged to present her idea so that her voice can be heard? What happens when her idea is encouraged and supported by others so that it becomes a reality? This was Jordan Feaster's dream, a dream that became a reality for our class. Her classmate, Neveah, describes our nature experience in her essay below. This project impressed me with its significant impact on my students. From beginning to end, my students were actively engaged with brainstorming, collaborating, planning, organizing, and carrying out a program that they envisioned and created. Nature's Children belongs to them.

*The school bus I've been sitting in for an eternity finally pulls into the parking lot. Excitement rushes through my blood like pure adrenaline, and I jump onto my feet to look at the view.*

*"Whoa!" I gasp. You can see for miles out here. And by miles, I mean you-could-probably-see-all-of-North-Carolina miles. Or even you-could-probably-see-all-of- America miles.*

*The students line up to get off the bus, and I follow the class outside. YIKES! It's freezing up here, and my ears are beginning to burst. Nausea clouds my stomach; I do my best not to throw up.*

*Mrs. Holshouser's class follows us to a balcony where you could probably see all of North Carolina. Did I mention that I love the thrills of being high up? I love heights. So much--I wish I could just stand on a large piece of rock that I'm seeing to my right.*

*I whip out my iPad and start taking photos, starting with the view from the balcony, then of a plaque that talks about the different birds that live here. Hawks, vultures, eagles. The usual types of birds you'd find in Salisbury.*

*Our class moves on to the restrooms. I stand outside, wondering what to do next. A friend of mine from Mrs. Holshouser's class walks up to me; I smile and say hello. I take a few more pictures with my iPad before putting it back in my red Achieve3000 drawstring bag.*

*A ranger walks up and introduces himself, and soon we begin our hike. The pros of the hike-- Heights, heights, and more heights. The view. The cons--Even more heights. Not that I'm afraid of heights, which I'm not. Several times I trip over a root, nearly sending me to my death. Another time, as my class walks back on the trail, I slide off the pinnacle, and quickly grab a plant covered in thorns, which--well, you know, it hurt pretty bad.*

*Besides nearly dying and my legs feeling like jelly, I actually enjoy the hike. The ranger stops a few times to talk about the history of the park. How water cut through the tough rock. How Native Americans lived here and called it Jomeokee, or something like that.*

*Next is Animal Adaptations. Now I'm sitting on a bench, freezing to death, rubbing my hands together to keep warm. I slide my jacket over my Nature's Children t-shirt, which for some reason I would not like to cover. I mean, it's such a nice shirt we designed. Why ruin it all with a plain, black, boring Old Navy jacket?*

*Okay, okay, think positive. What do I like about this exhibit? Touching furry animals is nice. Here we're learning about beavers, foxes, deer, skunks, possums, and more. So fluffy, I'm really gonna die! I've always liked biology, though. So I think freezing to death is really worth it.*

*At lunch break, I quickly gobble down my food. Who knew hiking and such could make you so hungry? Mrs. Fleming lines us up for another hike, a strenuous hike, to be exact. Again, I'm loving it. After returning, sadly, we line up to get back on the bus. Goodbye, Pilot Mountain.*

*Looking back, I'd love to go back to Pilot Mountain. No matter how much you may freeze, get sick, or almost fall off the mountain, I think someday I would definitely return to the best state park North Carolina ever had!*

*By Neveah Robinson, 7th grade*

When we listen to our students and believe in them and give them the opportunity of making their visions a reality, our classrooms become filled to bursting with this incredible energy that knows no bounds. Students become active participants in making this dream happen; they want to seize responsibility, to step outside of the typical “box,” and create a project that reaches far beyond our classroom walls, to be a part of a project that does not end with the school year, but has the possibility of growing and affecting more students nationwide.

Furkyk (as cited by Snelling, 2016) states, “Give students the opportunity to dream and explore and create the next big ideas.” While it can be daunting to venture outside of our comfort zone, for teacher and for students, it is well worth the risk and the effort. It would have been a crime to not have given voice and action to Jordan’s idea. If we believe in our students and listen to their ideas, no limit exists on what they might accomplish.

Smith (2017) quotes students as saying, “We want to know our opinions are valued and have influence on decisions made regarding our learning.” Furkyk (2016) also states, “If students feel shared ownership over learning, they are more likely to pursue it vigorously.” The true value of challenge-based learning is to turn the project over to our students, to be facilitators rather than teachers. Our students have ideas that we never imagined. They will amaze you with their diligence and creativity. All it takes is listening and believing.

Abbey Beam, another one of my students describes our experience: *It took many steps to make this dream a reality, starting with applying for grants from Achieve3000 and Rowan Partners For Education. We also had to find a state park to visit and an elementary school class to partner with. We ended up choosing Pilot Mountain State Park in Pinnacle, North Carolina as our visiting park. We got in touch with Park officials and set a date for our trip. We also found an awesome fifth grade class to partner with at our local elementary school. Every week my class and Mrs. Holshouser’s 5th grade class*

*met up to research and work on our projects. We enjoyed being role models for the elementary school students. We were so excited the day of our field trip! A number of the students had never been to the mountains. We took a long hike with the best of views. It was beautiful. Several found the trails narrow and scary. By the end of the day, we were all scrambling up and down the trails, pointing out the views, and excitedly talking about our next trip.*

### **How did our journey begin?**

Students in my AIG seventh grade class at North Rowan Middle School were challenged with writing an essay based on the Daughters of the American Revolution contest: *Pretend you are writing a journal while visiting one of the fifty-eight national parks.* One seventh grade student, Jordan Feaster, took her essay a step further. She imagined that she had created a program, *Nature's Children*, that gave students the opportunity to experience our rich national parks firsthand.

In her submission, Jordan Feaster wrote, *Here I am today, getting ready to read my journal to a group of children. I hope they visit some kind of park one day. That can change their world, to help them see the natural beauties of the world. They can follow in my footsteps and make a difference in the city. I helped out by starting the organization called Nature's Children. We donate funds for schools to visit parks and other places to learn about nature. If we don't do our part and care for nature, it could affect us.*

Rowan-Salisbury Schools, which is located in Rowan County and serves over nineteen thousand students in thirty-five schools, uses Achieve3000, which is a nationally recognized reading program. Jordan read articles from this program to further her vision of not only experiencing nature firsthand, but also providing community service to mentor younger students. During a community visit, Jordan shared her vision with Rowan-Salisbury Schools Superintendent Dr. Lynn Moody, who encouraged her to make her dream a reality.

The challenge then truly began. How could we make this vision actually happen? First, as in many cases, we needed funding. We were definitely stepping out of my comfort zone, but how could I ignore my student's idea? It felt like it would be a mistake to not give action to her voice. Jordan wrote a letter to the president of Achieve3000, Saki Dodelson, explaining her vision and how reading Achieve articles gave her inspiration. Dodelson replied to Jordan's request promising partial funding, a flyer, and drawstring bags for the venture. We still needed more. I then applied for a Rowan Partners for Education grant, which was awarded. We now had sufficient funds to support a field trip to a state park. We received \$250 from Rowan Partners for Education and \$100 from Achieve3000, which funded our costs for a bus driver, mileage, and substitute costs.

A vital part of Jordan's dream was for her class to be role models to younger students. We needed an elementary school class to mentor. Ashley Holshouser, fifth grade AIG teacher from our partner elementary school, North Rowan Elementary School, accepted our invitation leading to a rich collaborative experience for both our classes.

Now we needed a state park. I researched programs and sent emails. My colleague and I then headed to Pilot Mountain State Park to meet with Ranger Jesse Anderson to share ideas. Events were planned and dates were set. I wrote an article, *Jordan's Hope--Nature's Children*, that was published in the Salisbury Parent Teacher Magazine about making Jordan's dream come true. Now the real work began.

### **Students Form Groups and Research**

Thanks to the support of administrators from both the elementary and middle schools, we were able to schedule time blocks so that students were able to meet twice a week to research Pilot Mountain, to plan our upcoming trip, and to create projects together. Excitement filled the air for our classes as we took turns traveling to each other's schools, which are in easy walking distance from each other.

Students formed groups based on their interests in final projects, such as writing adventure stories, filming documentaries, producing creative writing, and filming commercials. Students were in charge of creating Google spreadsheets for t-shirt orders, group scheduling, and much more.

Reporter Rebecca Rider from the *Salisbury Post* visited our class and interviewed students about their Nature's Children vision. Students were very excited when their project was publicized in the local newspaper, Student's Idea Becomes Reality. They realized that their project had merit, and they worked even harder.

### **The Day Arrives**

The day for our trip finally arrived, a beautiful, sunny day. As the bus wound up the steep mountain, several students were frightened of the heights. It looked like we could topple right off. As students enthusiastically exited the buses and found their groups, we started our adventure. I realized I had taken for granted my numerous visits to the mountains. So many of our students had never been to a state park or to the mountains. In the beginning, several of my seventh grade students held my hands or the hands of our adult chaperones. As our hike continued, however, this changed to students on their own eagerly climbing up the next steep inclines, exploring crevices, and venturing closer to gaze upon the spectacular views. This was a totally new experience for many of our students, a doorway had been opened to them. Many said they wanted to bring their families back and visit more parks.

The students eagerly described their experiences in reflective essays that they shared when they returned to the classroom.

*Climbing up the mountain and looking up at the sky--it looked like cotton candy with big brown eagles soaring high. Even putting my hand in the Devil's Den felt as if something was going to reach out and suck me into the dark, cold area. The bones of the animal were so precise; it felt like it would come*



*back to life and snap its jaws closed, as if it was catching prey with its razor-sharp teeth. Overall, the experience was just exhilarating. Jordan Feaster (Rider, 2017)*

*Pilot Mountain was amazing! The one thing that kind of freaked me out was the height of the mountain, because we were like 200 feet. It was so high, you could feel the wind. Kelly and Jordan were my walking guides on the stairs because I was terrified of the stairs. When I was walking on the steps, I was thinking, 'This is how I die.' But overall, I thought the trip was phenomenal. Daphne Robinson (Rider, 2017)*

## **What Happened Next?**

In the weeks following our field trip, students continued to meet to work on their projects and presentations. Students created a survey of their experience: [Students' Reflection](#). This survey revealed that all of my class enjoyed their Pilot Mountain experience and that they would like to see their program grow into more state and national park visits and to include more students. We had a celebration the day of the presentations as students from both classes filled the library. Students wrote quotes about their experience which were published in our local newspaper, *The Salisbury Post*, [View from the Mountaintop](#). My class had an interactive face-to-face Zoom conference with Saki Dodelson, president of Achieve3000 about our experience. To students' delight, Dodelson asked if Achieve could write an article about our program that would be read nationally by subscribers in their reading program. Students were publicly recognized in the article for their photos and quotes. The day the Achieve3000 article about *Nature's Children* was published generated great excitement for my students.

## **Presentations**

This project also served as a springboard for my students to present and showcase their vision and their project at major events. A representative group shared their project at the NCTIES (North Carolina Technology in Education Society) State Conference, at Rowan-Salisbury's Blended Learning Symposium, and at the Digital Promise Showcase.

These presentations and this project have given my students a sense of confidence that is wonderful to see. They are making a difference. Our students want to have an active voice, to be agents of change. It has been an exciting journey and a rewarding experience as a teacher to see my students in action. Seeing my seventh graders serve as role models to the younger elementary students was inspiring. It wasn't always easy for either class. They had to quickly get to know each other, find their

groups of interest, and figure out how to work together to do research, planning, and to create projects. They rose to the challenge. My group of students recently had the idea to form a middle school leadership team. In their vision, each middle school would have representatives. Groups will meet and share ideas that they can then take back to help transform their schools. They are presenting their idea to district leaders.

My favorite example is the quote that one of my students created for the back of the t-shirts: *Nature is a gift; appreciate it* (Coleman, Caleb, 2017). The rest of the class loved Caleb's idea, and voted enthusiastically to use it. I cannot begin to describe how proud this made Caleb feel. From the beginning to the end of this project, my students have supported and encouraged each other. Their kindness shines forth like a beacon. Every step of the way, they have cheered each other on.

### **Future Plans**

*Seeing the smiles on kids' faces and the inspiration my class and I made on these younger kids made me feel like such a good human being. My goal in life is to make a difference in the world and this project sets me up for that. Even though we are young, we can make such a great impact. I hope this project furthers into a big thing all across the world, and we reach out to people of all differences.* Abby Beam

*Kids might have small hands, but our hands aren't broken. We can do anything an adult can do—just try and believe in yourself.* Jordan Feaster

*Our future plans are to go to a national park like the Grand Canyon or The Great Smoky Mountains. I'm extremely grateful to have been a part of it. Thanks to Mrs. Fleming, she's put us in our own zone of proximal development* (Vgotski, 1978). Daphne Robinson

Daphne's vision was more prophetic than we ever expected. Our proposal for a national park visit, to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, was approved. We are writing grants and letters to

raise money for this next part of our journey. We want this program to continue. We plan to continue our visits to major parks and to help our program to expand to include more students. While our dream of visiting a national park is underway, we don't want to stop there; we want Nature's Children to continue to grow.

### **Making it Happen**

This is a project that can be easily replicated in other classrooms and schools. Actually, that is part of Jordan's vision, for many children to work together to learn about and experience nature. In Jordan's mind, her dream will truly be successful if her program spreads to other classes and schools. Just imagine if teachers collaborated to make this happen? With our technology today, this could be accomplished.

Student research about potential parks to visit is one of the first steps. Grant money or contributions will be needed for the actual field trip. One of the greatest factors about this project was that control and management were given to the students. They did the research; they formed the groups; they told others about their venture; they designed t-shirts; they sent invitations; they wrote essays and quotes for possible publication, and they collaborated to create projects and presentations. As I quickly learned, two key ingredients for success are belief in our students and the power of listening to their voices. This was their project. They owned it.

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