DIVISION OF SOIL & WATER CONSERVATION
NORTH CAROLINA

BOPS!

Best Outreach Practices

A Guide for SWCDs by SWCDs



CONTENTS

Successful outreach is built on trust, consistency, and authentic relationships. The districts who contributed to this survey repeatedly emphasized that meaningful partnerships, not expensive materials, lead to lasting impacts. By remaining visible, communicating well, and creating engaging experiences, new staff can build programs that grow stronger every year.

Topic	Page
Building Relationships	2
Be Visible in Your Community	4
Communication is Key	5
Developing Programs that are Impactful	8
Marketing Your Outreach Program	13
Funding and Resources	15

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

Why It Matters

Long before the first classroom presentation is delivered, the first community event is attended, or the first educational display is assembled, successful outreach begins with something much simpler - people.

Throughout the Best Outreach Practices survey, one message appeared again and again: relationships are the foundation of effective outreach. Regardless of experience level, geographic location, or program focus, educators consistently described trust as their most valuable resource. While creative lessons, engaging demonstrations, and quality educational materials are important, they are rarely what opens the first door. Instead, opportunities are created through meaningful relationships with teachers, administrators, community leaders, volunteers, and partner organizations.

Many educators reflected that their most successful programs were not the result of a single presentation or marketing effort. They were the product of months, or even years, of consistently showing up, following through on commitments, and becoming a familiar, trusted presence within the community. Trust is not earned through one email or one event; it grows through reliability, genuine interest, and a willingness to invest in people before expecting anything in return.

Building relationships also creates opportunities that are not necessarily planned. A teacher who enjoyed working with you may recommend your program to colleagues. A librarian may invite you to participate in a community event. A county employee may connect you with a new partner organization. Over time, those individual relationships form a network that strengthens every aspect of outreach.

Recommendations from Educators and Outreach Coordinators

- Find your 'in' within each school (principal, STEM coordinator, counselor, media specialist, extension agent, or teachers).
- Build relationships before asking for participation.
- Network with libraries, Cooperative Extension, farming organizations, parks, Wildlife Federation, EENC, Master Gardeners, Scouts, museums, and neighboring districts.
- Participate in events targeted at educators such as the annual EENC conference and local college/university symposiums.
- Personal conversations often have the greatest long-term impact.

"Community engagement largely defines our land management culture in this area."
- Brian "Bonny" Bonville, Watauga SWCD

Key Takeaway

Look for opportunities to help before asking others to help you. Partner with other agencies/organizations doing good work to amplify your impact.

Reflection

- Have I identified a key contact at each school or organization?
- Which schools or organizations would benefit from a stronger relationship?
- What is one small action I could take this month to strengthen a partnership?
- Have I offered to help a partner with their education or outreach efforts?

BE VISIBLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Why It Matters

Soil & Water has been labeled the “best kept secret” - we don’t want to be a secret! Visibility builds recognition, with recognition comes appreciation and support. When educators regularly participate in community events, support local initiatives, and engage with residents outside of formal presentations, they build recognition and credibility that cannot be achieved through flyers or social media alone.

Visibility is not measured by how often people see your logo. It is measured by how often they think of your organization when they need a trusted educational or outreach partner.

Recommendations from Educators and Outreach Coordinators

- Stay visible in the community year-round through fairs, banquets, festivals, appreciation dinners, and local events.
- Host booths with interactive displays.
- Offer internships and volunteer opportunities.
- Encourage technical staff and supervisors to help with events.
- Use outreach events to connect residents with conservation resources.
- Table at local career days at all education levels from elementary up to college!

Key Takeaway

Not every event needs to result in a new partnership. Sometimes, simply being present is enough to plant the seed for future opportunities. Rather than expecting people to find your programs, bring your expertise to the places they already visit.

Reflection

- Where are people already gathering?
- Have I identified key community events for the year?
- Am I introducing myself to new community partners?

COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Why It Matters

Every successful outreach program is built on clear, consistent communication. While engaging lessons and creative activities often receive the most attention, experienced educators repeatedly emphasized that communication is what keeps partnerships strong and programs running smoothly.

Teachers, administrators, community partners, and volunteers are all balancing full schedules and competing priorities. Outreach educators who communicate clearly, respond promptly, and provide timely information become trusted partners rather than another item on an already crowded to-do list.

Strong communication also demonstrates professionalism. Every email, phone call, meeting, flyer, or social media post reflects not only the educator but also the district they represent. Clear communication builds credibility, reduces misunderstandings, and encourages long-term collaboration.

Recommendations from Educators and Outreach Coordinators

- Communicate early and often with teachers and partners.
- Send reminders throughout the school year.
- Follow up after meetings and events, including thank-you messages.
- Respond promptly to questions and changes.
- Keep contact lists updated since school staff change frequently.
- Keep everyone informed by providing updates such as registration confirmations, parking information, schedule changes, and other important information.

Key Takeaway

If you think you're communicating early enough, communicate a little earlier. Frequent communication does not have to be lengthy—it simply needs to be timely, accurate, and helpful. A brief thank-you email, a few photographs from the event, or a request for feedback shows appreciation and keeps communication open for future opportunities.

Reflection

- Have I confirmed the date, time, and location?
- Have I shared expectations with everyone involved?
- Have I planned a follow-up message after the event?

"Continuous communication helps me with getting school programs scheduled. Emailing at different times during the school year helps send teachers a reminder."
- Jessica Davis, NC Association of SWCD Education Coordinator, Randolph SWCD

Patnership Contact List

Organization	Contact	Phone #	Email	Date Contacted	Next Steps

DEVELOPING IMPACTFUL PROGRAMS

Why It Matters

A single positive experience may inspire a student to pursue a career in conservation, motivate a homeowner or farmer to improve water quality practices, or encourage a teacher to invite you back year after year.

Whether working with kindergarten students discovering soil for the first time or adults learning about watershed protection, memorable programs engage participants through observation, conversation, and hands-on exploration. These experiences encourage questions, build confidence, and help learners connect conservation concepts to their everyday lives.

Great outreach programs also recognize that every audience is different. A lesson that captivates fourth-grade students may not resonate with community leaders or landowners. Successful educators adapt their approach, meeting participants where they are and presenting information in ways that are relevant, engaging, and practical.

Recommendations from Educators and Outreach Coordinators

- Have a clear registration process.
- Implement signage for offsite locations so attendees can find their way.
- Use engaging tools such as rainfall simulators, Enviroscapes, wildlife pelts and other tactile elements that promote student engagement.
- Utilize lesson plans in Project SWAT, Project WET, and other environmental education workshops such as these.
- Free Lesson Plans
- Green Girls Curriculum
- NC DEQ DEMLR: Erosion Patrol, Where is all our Soil Going, and other educational resources.
- Ag in the Classroom provides lesson plans, workshops, age appropriate magazines and a book program.
- Use the River Runner tool to show how a rain drop travels from a specific location and where it ends up.

- Encourage deeper thinking by asking open-ended questions, celebrating observations, and allowing time for discussion.
- Adapt to your audience and be flexible with activity structure so each participant feels included.
- Be mindful of jargon; introduce/explain important vocabulary.
- Have a backup plan! Especially for outdoor programs in the event of adverse weather.
- Plan a realistic schedule - provide ample time for presentations and activities.
- Have a plan for attendees who arrive early or late and for downtime during events.
- Consider implementing passive outreach programs such as a seed library, rain garden with signage, book barn or scavenger hunt.
- Evaluate your program after completion - determine if you met your objective and if changes are needed.
- Know your audience:

STUDENTS

- Align your program with their curriculum.
- Provide pre and post visit lessons for teachers to implement.
- Increase program participation by providing needed resources and supplies.

ADULTS

- The average American has a reading level equivalent to an 8th grader, so tailor your program accordingly.
- Participate in your county Citizens' Academy to educate locals on the different programs the district provides.

TEACHERS

- Schedule your program on teacher work days or during the summer.
- Offer continuing education credits.

FARMERS

- Be mindful of planting and harvesting season when selecting program dates. Build events around participants' availability.
- Highlight services your district can offer such as cost share funding, a no till drill, etc.
- Motivate farmers with swag and food they like.
- Nominate an Outstanding Conservation Farm Family.

OFFICALS

- Invite government officials to board meetings.
- Host a breakfast in your district that highlights your employees, achievements, goals, and appreciation of local partners.
- Share high-impact photos that demonstrate the impact you're making in your community.

1

Welcome

Introduce yourself and establish the purpose of the program.

2

Engage

Begin with a question, demonstration, or surprising fact that captures attention.



3

Explore

Allow participants to investigate through hands-on activities and discussion.

4

Explain

Connect observations to key concepts using clear, age-appropriate language.

5

Apply

Help participants relate what they have learned to their own homes, schools, or communities.

6

Reflect

Encourage participants to share one new idea or action they plan to take.

Seasonal Programming Ideas

FALL

- Environmental field days
- Career Fairs
- NC State Fair
- Mountain State Fair
- School Open Houses
- Teacher Outreach



WINTER

- Touch base with local schools about Envirothon
- Grant writing
- Partner appreciation
- World Soil Day
- Legacy Planning Event



SPRING

- Area Envirothon
- State Envirothon
- Environmental field days
- Education Contest (Poster/Essay/Bookmark)
- Earth Day
- School Field Days
- STEM nights
- Outstanding Conservation Farm Family
- Teacher Outreach



SUMMER

- Camps
- Envirothon School
- Resoucrce Conservation Workshop (RCW)
- Conservation Employee Training (CET)
- Farmers markets
- Community Festivals
- Library Programs



Tell stories, Not Just Facts

When discussing erosion, connect lessons to local streams. When teaching about pollinators, highlight native plants. When discussing agriculture, share stories from local farms and producers. Connecting information to familiar places and experiences helps learners understand why conservation matters in their own lives.

It's All Down Stream From Here is a storytelling activity that helps students visualize how waterways are connected and it can be tailored to local ecosystems.

Quick Reference Checklist

- ☐ Contact Schools Early
- ☐ Confirm Schedules
- ☐ Promote on Social Media & Local Bulletins
- ☐ Bring Engaging Hands-On Materials
- ☐ Track Participation
- ☐ Follow Up Afterward
- ☐ Share Photos
- ☐ Thank Partners
- ☐ Complete Program Evaluation

Key Takeaway

When learners see how conservation affects their families, schools, or communities, the information becomes personal—and therefore more memorable. The strongest outreach programs don't succeed because they have the biggest budgets or the most polished graphics. They succeed because they tell authentic stories, celebrate meaningful experiences, and consistently remind their communities that conservation is something everyone can be part of.

Reflection

- Have I adapted the content to my audience?
- Am I encouraging participation rather than passive observation?
- Have I connected the topic to local issues or everyday experiences?

MARKETING YOUR PROGRAMS

Why It Matters

People are more likely to participate when they understand the value of the experience. A well-written social media post, an engaging photograph, or a teacher's testimonial can inspire someone to register for an event long before they ever meet the educator or outreach coordinator.

Every flyer posted, newsletter published, social media post shared, or conversation at a community event is an opportunity to tell the story of conservation and invite others to become part of it. Marketing helps families discover educational opportunities, encourages teachers to bring programs into their classrooms, and reminds community leaders of the important work being done every day.

Effective marketing is not about promoting yourself. It is about helping people understand why your programs matter and why they should care. When outreach educators consistently share stories of learning, stewardship, and community impact, they build awareness that extends far beyond a single event.

Recommendations from Educators and Outreach Coordinators

- Ask related organizations to share/post your events and offer to post theirs.
- Use Facebook consistently.
- Share annual calendars with schools.
- Highlight success stories and photos.
- Promote programs through newsletters, listservs, newspapers, and county communication channels.
- Utilize programs like Canva to create high quality social media posts, flyers, brochures, and other useful marketing materials.
- Utilize effective design techniques when designing market materials and consider accessibility.

- Hang flyers in areas you would expect your target audience to be such as farm supply stores, community centers, and schools.
- When possible, provide SWCD-themed swag at events. (Stickers are cheap and popular!)
- Affirm and motivate teachers by awarding gift cards to them when their student wins a contest.
- Frame winning posters and display them publicly.
- Keep track of the number of programs offered and number of students and general public reached to share these with the Division of Soil and Water Conservation, partners, sponsors, and local officials.
- Develop a "brand" with your district logo, select colors and fonts.
- Provide professional development credits when possible - this can encourage participation from teachers, supervisors, and educators pursuing certifications.
- Explain why an event matters:

"Join us for a watershed program!"



"Discover how the water flowing through your neighborhood connects to the streams, rivers, and wildlife that make our community unique."

"When we do not have a lot of signups for a public event, we ask the County PIO to post a flyer of the event. This widens the audience realm to more than our email and social media contacts."
- Sherry Scully, Durham SWCD

Key Takeaway

Every flyer, social media post, or newsletter article is an opportunity to inspire someone to learn, participate, or become a partner. Sharing educational content between events keeps your organization visible and reinforces your role as a trusted community resource.

Reflection

- Is the design clean, simple, and easy to read?
- Does my message explain why the program matters?
- Do I have a plan to share photos and celebrate the event afterward?

FUNDING AND RESOURCES

Why It Matters

For many educators, funding can feel like one of the greatest challenges. Budgets are often limited, supplies can be expensive, and new opportunities frequently arise without additional financial support. Yet throughout the survey, experienced outreach professionals shared an encouraging perspective: successful high-quality programs do not always require expensive materials.

Recommendations from Educators and Outreach Coordinators

- Seek grants and local sponsorships from organizations such as RC&Ds, Ag South, Farm Bureau, Farm Credit, NCDA&CS ADFP, NC Foundation for Soil and Water Conservation, and more!
- Inform your event sponsors how their funds are supporting student development and public awareness.
- Don't limit yourself to one funding source. A combination of small contributions often has a greater impact than a single large grant.
- Successful funding requests rarely begin with an application. Instead, they begin with relationships built over time.
- Repurpose materials.
- Partner with local experts.
- Don’t be afraid to ask, the answer is always "no" if you never ask.
- Local organizations may be willing to let you use their space for free or at a low cost such as county-owned facilities, parks, and recreation centers.

“NC Foundation for Soil & Water has been a HUGE help for many of our programs. If they do not have funding, [they] will help point us in the right direction.”
- Kayla McCoy, Wilkes SWCD

- Utilize resources housed in nearby SWCDs:
  - Soils Tents
    - Area 1 - Buncombe SWCD
    - Area 2 - Wilkes SWCD
    - Area 3 - Chatham SWCD
    - Area 4 - Durham SWCD
    - Area 5 - Washington SWCD
    - Area 6 - Duplin SWCD
    - Area 7 - Harnett SWCD
    - Area 8- Cleveland SWCD
  - Mobile Soils Classroom & Enviroscapes - please note a half-ton pickup vehicle is of sufficient size to move one of the 14-foot tandem Mobile Soils Classroom trailers.
    - Area 1 - Buncombe SWCD
    - Area 2 - Wilkes SWCD
    - Area 3 - Chatham SWCD
    - Area 5 - Martin SWCD
    - Area 6 - Duplin SWCD
    - Area 8 - Davey SWCD
  - Rainfall Simulator Models
    - Coastal - Martin SWCD
    - Piedmont - Chatham SWCD
    - Mountain - Buncombe SWCD
  - Remote lesson boxes & a groundwater simulator model is housed at Burke SWCD.

Key Takeaway

Organizations are much more likely to invest in people they know and trust. Whether requesting donations, volunteers, or sponsorships, approach every conversation professionally, clearly explain your mission, and express appreciation for every contribution.

Reflection

- Am I making full use of existing resources?
- Have I identified potential community partners/sponsors?
- Have I thanked supporters and recognized their contributions?










SOIL & WATER...YOURS FOR LIFE!
WHAT IS SOIL?

