



# WHAT IS A **GREEN** SCHOOL?

Green schools prepare students to become leaders and citizens who understand how the natural world works, see the patterns that connect human activity to nature, and have the knowledge, values, and skills to act effectively on that understanding.

Green schools contribute to making communities more sustainable, explore solutions to environmental problems, and serve as models of responsible action.

Because students learn from the school's actions as well as from teachers and assignments, all of the school's decisions and practices become teaching opportunities. Schools teach by classroom lessons, but also by the food they serve in the dining hall, the ways they use energy and resources, the processes by which they make decisions, and their relationship to the larger community.

## THERE IS NO BLUEPRINT FOR BEING A GREEN SCHOOL. THE HALLMARK OF THIS MOVEMENT IS ITS DIVERSITY.

Being a green school is an evolving process. Schools begin with actions that are appropriate to their resources, histories, and levels of understanding. Large changes often begin with small steps.

The Center for Ecoliteracy has identified four areas that are particularly fertile for learning about sustainable living: **food, the campus, community, and teaching and learning.**

**FOOD** How we grow, process, transport, market, prepare, and dispose of food is critical to central sustainability issues, including resource use, energy, pollution, and water and soil conservation. Food serves as an ideal entry point for understanding the connections between such issues as hunger, trade policy, workers' rights, energy use, and climate change.

In the lunchroom, the school directly affects student health and, ultimately, public health and long-term community sustainability,

while teaching students about nutrition. Through their purchasing, schools help support local agriculture. Gardens create opportunities to experience basic ecological literacy concepts firsthand—the flow of energy from the sun to plants and animals, planetary cycles of water and weather, the web of relations embodied in every bite. They help students learn where the food they eat comes from and how it gets to them. Children will almost always try food if they grow and prepare it themselves. Any classroom subject can be integrated through food, as seen in the Center for Ecoliteracy's book, *Big Ideas: Linking Food, Culture, Health, and the Environment*.

Some places to begin:

- Start a school garden.
- Compost kitchen scraps, and use them in the garden.
- Increase the fresh, seasonal, locally sourced food served by the school.
- Trace the paths food takes from seed to plate and identify all the people whose efforts are needed to bring them their food.

**THE CAMPUS** By the materials they use and the pollution, waste, and greenhouse emissions they generate or eliminate, schools directly affect environmental sustainability and the health of students and staff. They impact the environment through the resources they consume, the energy that heats, cools, and lights their campus; the space they occupy; and their burden on community services. Schools teach about sustainability by including students in discussions and decisions related to the campus.

Some places to begin:

- Conduct an audit of energy and water use. Set goals for shrinking the school's ecological footprint. Make students responsible for monitoring progress and reminding teachers and other students about acting responsibly.
- Collect and weigh the trash produced by the school in a day. Trace where waste goes when it leaves the campus. Brainstorm ways to reduce, reuse, and recycle (in that order).
- Reduce or replace toxic products for cleaning, pest control, and maintenance.
- Plant trees and create natural habitats on the campus.

**COMMUNITY** Schools are far more than buildings, classrooms, and curricula. They are also networks of relationships in which students spend much of their time. Within these networks, students develop the values and attitudes they will carry into adulthood.

## COMMUNITIES SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE LIVING WHEN THEY OFFER THEIR MEMBERS MEANING AND VALUE THAT DOES NOT DEPEND ON MATERIAL ACQUISITIONS OR THE EXPENDITURE OF NATURAL RESOURCES.

Schools foster sustainability by helping their members realize their full physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual potential.

Some places to begin:

- Adopt a green vision or mission statement to guide school policy decisions.
- Identify what is valuable and needs to be sustained in communities and cultures.
- Imagine ways to improve the quality of life in communities while requiring less material consumption or stress on the environment.
- Find research and service projects that serve the local community.

**TEACHING AND LEARNING** Whether they start with an environmental issue or basic ecological principles, teachers can nurture the understanding and competencies for sustainable living. There is no one “green school” teaching style. Students learn best when strategies are varied to include hands-on activities, time for reflection and thoughtful discussion, a mix of indoor and outdoor environments, and opportunities for interdisciplinary projects.

Some places to begin:

- Look for opportunities to get out of the classroom and into the natural world.
- Think of the campus as a living laboratory.
- Find places throughout the curriculum where teachers are already teaching concepts related to sustainable living and build on those.
- Identify opportunities for creating or restoring habitat damaged by human activity.



# CENTER FOR ECOLITERACY

The Center for Ecoliteracy is a Berkeley, California-based nonprofit that supports and advances education for sustainable living. Through its initiative Smart by Nature: Schooling for Sustainability, the Center offers expertise, inspiration, and support to the growing green schools movement in K–12 education. It provides books, teaching guides, and other publications; professional development seminars; and consulting, including academic program audits, in-depth curriculum development, and coaching to improve teaching and learning for sustainability. The Center’s 2009 book, *Smart by Nature: Schooling for Sustainability*, showcases inspiring stories about public, independent, and charter schools across the United States. Environmental educator David W. Orr calls *Smart by Nature* “must reading for teachers, school administrators, parents, and the concerned public.” Learn more at:

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