



Environmental Education: What Is Our Responsibility?

I majored in elementary education and minored in environmental studies, so environmental education was a passion of mine early on and an integral part of my curriculum when I began my first teaching job with fourth and fifth graders. I designed units on habitat depletion and resources used in consumer products, planned field trips to landfills and natural wetlands, and worked with several local organizations in search of resources. However, when I made the shift to administration, that passion and commitment to environmental education fell by the wayside for various reasons; the pressures and intense learning curve as a new administrator were at the forefront.

But as environmental issues such as global warming recently have taken center stage, I have a renewed sense of urgency about environmental education and believe it is my responsibility as a school leader to integrate it into the curriculum. I find myself pondering questions from a broader perspective—what is our role in schools to

develop global and environmentally responsible citizens with the knowledge, skills, and compassion to meet the challenges of our time? If we are in an environmental crisis—which is becoming harder and harder to refute—doesn't it make sense to not only work to solve problems reactively, but to start educating children at a

young age and instilling behaviors we're currently trying to change in adults? Do teachers have the understanding of the content and the resources available to effectively integrate environmental education into their instructional programs? These are discussions that should be occurring more frequently among school leaders and in teacher preparation programs, state departments of education, and local districts.

One School at a Time

We are finding ways to focus energy and resources toward building a more comprehensive environmental education program at the Camino Nuevo Charter Academy—Harvard, an inner-city school serving 450 K-8 students. Over the years, the program has grown and evolved. We have progressed from celebrating Earth Day to participating in Earth Week and its series of activities such as conducting an e-drive, which provides an opportunity for the local community to recycle electronics equipment containing toxic materials safely; distributing cloth grocery bags to all staff and students; and exploring energy conservation by participating in TV-Turnoff Week.

I have identified key contributing components of our evolution toward a more meaningful and integrated environmental education program:

Engage Staff. Engaging and empowering staff has been critical in further developing our program. I began the process of growing our program by creating a paid coordinator position and opened it up to the staff. The coordinator quickly became the cheerleader for the program, pursuing a number of new initiatives and partnerships and slowly cultivating buy-in among the staff. It was important for this to be a process, not a mandate from administration, to be successful.

Engage the Community. We recognize the importance of educating our families if we want environmentally responsible behaviors to transfer over to students' off-campus lives. To achieve this

goal, we share information regularly with families in our weekly newsletter and constantly invite parents to participate in learning experiences with their children. Our ecology coordinator says, "By empowering our students and families to change their habits as consumers and citizens, they can see just how their efforts impact their physical surroundings outside of school."

Lead by Example. Our school strives to make environmental impact a natural consideration in all decisions, such as how many copies we make and what is communicated electronically, promoting the use of reusable dishes among the staff, and looking for ways to reduce waste associated with our meal program. We also implemented a comprehensive recycling program. We each make many decisions every day that affect the environment in some capacity, and as a school we are trying to take the lead and model responsible decision-making in our community.

The goals of environmental education are to:

- Foster clear awareness of and concern about economic, social, political, and ecological interdependence in urban and rural areas;
- Provide every person with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment, and skills needed to protect and improve the environment; and
- Create new patterns of behavior of individuals, groups, and society as a whole toward the environment (Rasmussen, 2000).

I can't imagine a more important set of values to impart to our students. As Al Gore stated in his testimony before Congress in March 2007, "we do not have time to play around with this," so it is important to take steps now. We are educating the next generation of educators, business leaders, and government officials. What they do with this knowledge and these skills will determine the health of the planet in the years to come. Their work will be our legacy. □

Kendra Kecker was principal of Camino Nuevo Charter Academy—Harvard in Los Angeles from 2002 to 2007. Her e-mail address is k_kecker@yahoo.com.

Reference

- Rasmussen, K. (2000, January). Environmental education evolves: developing citizens furthering education reform. *Education Update*, 1-6.

HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

The author believes that schools should make more of an effort to incorporate an environmental education program into their curriculum. With global warming and other serious issues affecting the environment, do you believe it is a school's responsibility to teach children how they can help reverse the effects?

Share your thoughts and opinions with other principals by going to the Principals' Office blog at <http://naesp.typepad.com>.



CraftPlus®

- ✓ Spiraling K-8 curriculum
- ✓ Differentiated instruction
- ✓ Students learn craft, process, and conventions
- ✓ Supports content reading programs
- ✓ For individual grades (K-5) and middle school
- ✓ District sales include day-long training

New Component! 180 Grade-Level Writing Lessons!

"CraftPlus builds professional learning communities! Teachers collaborate around student work, quality instructional techniques, and formative assessments."
— Barb Smith, Director of Reading, Reamstown, PA

DOWNLOADABLE SAMPLES AT
www.maupinhouse.com

Maupin House



Spend Your "Golden" Years as an Ambassador for American Education!

Looking for a way to see the world and add some adventure to your work at the same time? Perhaps you've recently retired or are nearing retirement but still eager to make a significant difference in the lives of school-aged children and their families. Or maybe you're wondering how you can help promote mutual understanding between our country and others around the globe. Do all these things and more by going to work in one of the many American-sponsored schools overseas.

For more information, send an e-mail to overseasschools@naesp.org.

NAESP
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
Serving All Elementary and Middle Level Principals