

EARTH DAY IS EVERY DAY AT GREEN WOODS CHARTER SCHOOL IN PHILADELPHIA

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Green Right Now

Although every teacher and student at [Green Woods Charter School](#) will be devoting themselves to a full day of environmental service this Earth Day, in reality, it's pretty much like any other day at the school.



The only public charter school in the country that is located inside a nature center-Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education and its surrounding 350 acres in Philadelphia-Green Woods uses environmental and ecological concepts to drive the development of its curriculum and instruction.

Environmental education became serious in 2001, when the state legislature passed the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Environment and Ecology, the only such standards in the country. It also left schools scrambling for new curricula to meet the standards. Jean Wallace, who had a degree in environmental education from Arcadia University and was working as a curriculum developer at Earth Force, a nonprofit organization, was suddenly deluged with requests for materials.

“Working with hundreds of schools, I could see that principals and teachers just weren’t getting behind the new standards from a leadership perspective,” she recalls. “I kept hearing, ‘I just don’t see the point of devoting instructional time to environmental study, or ‘I’m sure these standards aren’t here to stay.’”

Wallace could see that most schools were not using the standards for the rich opportunity they presented. So when she learned that Green Woods had an opening for a curriculum coordinator, she jumped at the chance.

But there was a small glitch: Green Woods had no curriculum, she discovered. So Wallace and her team set about creating one.

“Yes, it was a Herculean task but also an incredible opportunity,” says Wallace, now the CEO and Academic Director for Green Woods. “We had a clean slate and that gave our

teachers tremendous creativity. We could really focus on how we knew students learned best.”

Kindergarten through fourth grade focuses on the basics, including studying four different ecosystems, using four of the center’s ponds.



The program encompasses in-depth study of seed dispersal, insects and wildlife of the field, weather patterns, the forest ecosystems, migrating birds, and much more.

The fourth grade is the “bridge” year, where students transition from a focus on local environment to a global perspective, including an in-depth look at the Kyoto Protocol.

Sixth, seventh, and eighth grades branch out further, studying science, literature, and history within an ecological context.

“What’s exciting is that 50 to 60 percent of the state’s environment and ecology standards are aligned with social studies,” says Wallace. “There’s a natural blend between social studies and environmental studies. So for a unit on coal mining, students are learning about the extraction of coal in Pennsylvania, immigrants, child labor laws, and reading historical fiction.”

The school has met its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) each year (a statewide accountability measure that public schools must meet); been awarded “Exemplary Status” for its curriculum; received a 2007 Governor’s Award for Environmental Excellence, and, last year, a “Best Practices Award,” from the Philadelphia School District.



Through the development of their award-winning curriculum, Wallace and her staff have also helped support the opening of an environmental school in Pittsburgh, at Frick Park and Growing Up Green - a charter school in the Bronx, NY.

Green Woods is currently lending their expertise to founders of the Seven Generations Charter School located in the Lehigh Valley.

Green Woods has 200 students and the waiting list is long. At a recent charter school fair, they received 108 applications for just 13 kindergarten openings. After allowing current students’ siblings first preference, Green Woods, like all charter schools, selects its enrollment through a lottery.

Gail Craighead, with two daughters at the school, enrolled after hearing so many positive comments from other parents.

“The 24-students per class creates a warm and nurturing atmosphere. This was particularly important to me as the mother of a child with a learning disability,” says Craighead. “What I think is invaluable is the breath and scope of all aspects of environmental awareness. This knowledge is something my daughters will have for the rest of their lives.”

The school was recently featured in local public service announcements and on two television stations, including [WPVI-TV](#) in Philadelphia.

Green Woods, in conjunction with the Schuylkill Center, numerous community groups, and the Philadelphia Police Department, is part of the Toad Detour Committee. Each year in Roxborough, a Philadelphia neighborhood, hundreds of toads migrate from nearby woods to the Roxborough Reservoir. To do this, the toads must cross several streets; more than a hundred are killed each year.

The school’s eighth grade students and their partners created a Toad Detour brochure, detailing the problem. This Earth Day, seventh and eighth graders will hike to the detour site to clear trash from the migration routes. The committee will then continue to monitor the routes to ensure safe passage on nights of heavy migration.



“The toad migration project has allowed our eighth grade students to get a real ‘jump start’ on civic engagement,” says Wallace. “They should be very proud of their efforts.”