

Brandywine Springs joins Green School program



Editor's Note: The following piece was written by Sonia Saunders, a grade 5 teacher at Brandywine Springs School in the Red Clay Consolidated School District.

This year, Brandywine Springs School joined her sister Red Clay schools in the Green School Program, also known as Green Building United. The Green School Program is recognized at the national level, and includes twelve, and growing, environmental pathways for students to pro-actively engage in developing goals, plans, and implement eco-sustainable projects in their school and community.

For our first year in the Green School Program, Brandywine Springs School was committed to the Energy, Schoolyard Habitat, and Healthy Lifestyles Pathways. Each of these pathways required regular meetings and activities with students, teachers, and community members, as well as many volunteer hours driven by the passions and dedication of everyone involved!

Energy Pathway

This year, the Energy Pathway rolled out in three phases. Mrs. Saunders' 5th grade class took the lead. They researched and presented energy sources; their uses, the utilization process, advantages, and disadvantages. Mr. Ashwin Patel, BSS Facilities Manager, showed them the many sources of energy that are used to run the school. After which, they audited the K-8 classrooms to track their energy usage, and then made recommendations for energy conservation.

For the second phase, Saunders' 5th grade class passed the baton by sharing their presentations with the 4th and 5th grade Talented and Gifted (TAG) students, who in turn created Energy Conservation presentations for grades K-5. Mrs. Walsh, TAG teacher, challenged them create two levels of

presentations, one for K-2 and another, more sophisticated for grades 3-5. The classroom teachers opened their classrooms to the project and the TAG students delivered their presentations along with their passion. To conclude, each classroom was asked to choose an energy monitor, and to complete a home energy survey, paper or on-line, with their parents.

Meanwhile, for the third phase, Mrs. Saunders wrote a grant for an Energy Expo. It was accepted, and on May 30th, both Green Building United and Practical Energy Solutions (PES) brought an eight-station Expo and many energy experts to Brandywine Springs School. The Energy Expo was attended by 5th grade students who were engaged in the hands-on activities, actively discussed current and future energy demands and sources, and were intent to learn more! Expanding on student involvement even further, there were two BSS students at each station - 5th grade TAG and a 7th grade, from Mr. Kelly's Science class. As partners, they were able to assist in the station activities and lead the discussions. Wow! What a day of learning! Next year, we will build upon this model and reach out to the community of BSS families along with other student-led projects.

Schoolyard Habitat Pathway

The Schoolyard Habitat Pathway took into consideration all of the environmental activities that were already going on in the school. The goal was to take inventory of the habitats around BSS, and then augment, enhance, and unify before starting anything new. With the support, dedication, and funding from our PTO, students, and teachers, we worked together on many projects. For example, on Earth Day, together, Red Clay and Brandywine Alliance and Mrs. Marioni's students enhanced the Bluebird habitat in the schoolyard by planting bushes and installing a Bluebird house. Then, Boy Scout Pack 29, under the leadership of Melissa Irwin, also VP PTO, planted an inspirational garden and decorative birdhouse by the student entrance. You can't help to smile and feel a touch of harmony as you walk up to the doors :).

Next, in the glass-encased inner courtyard, Mrs. Marioni and her Kindergarteners, Ms. Grant (Ele. Music teacher), and Mrs. Hairston (MS Art), along with the 2nd graders helped to add new plants and mulch to the Butterfly Waystation and Pollinator Garden. In addition, the PTO funded the purchase of additional outdoor tables (assembled by Nurse Archer, Mr. Hussar, and Mr. Risner), umbrellas, bird feeders, birdbaths (solar and regular), and soothing chimes. The inner courtyard was transformed! So many students fell in love with the peaceful feeling of nature in this in this very special space. Even looking at the courtyard through the glass gives every passer-by a sense of tranquility. Judging by the talk around the school, I know it will be in-demand for lessons for all subjects and grades. I'm sure that as more students experience the inner courtyard, their innate sense of creativity, appreciation, and innovation will lead us to our future projects.

Healthy Lifestyles Pathway

Our Healthy Lifestyles Pathways has multiple projects as well. In the classrooms and cafeteria, Brandywine Springs School students are already recycling, and are now eating balanced meals to stay healthy and nourished. The emphasis on wholesome food prevails in and out of the cafeteria!

Vegetable Gardens have been planted and students have literally had their hands in the project! Thanks to the tireless dedication of Mrs. Hairston, Mrs. Marioni, Mrs. MacAllister (3rd grade teacher), and their students who planted vegetables from packaged seeds, as well as those from decomposed pumpkins from the year before! This project successfully enabled them to dig-in and see the fruits of their labors!

The students are so eager to see how much their plants will grow over the course of the summer when they return in the fall. These hands-on activities made learning fun, authentic, and gave the students a sense of empowerment. Projects and activities such as these create strong foundations for expansion in the future! I'm confident that this project will expand in many ways!

It Takes a Village

As the Green School Lead teacher, I have been involved in guiding these three pathways which includes; writing the grants for funding, coordinating the efforts of the teachers and students, bridging communication between the administration, PTO, and staff, and inspiring them to see the significance of unifying our efforts to add strength and vision to our charter. As the expression goes, "it takes a village," ...and that it has...we did it together!

I am proud to say that here at Brandywine Springs School; we have the staff, students, and an administration who understand the meaning and power of teamwork, cooperation, and STEAM/Project-based learning as we seek to accomplish our overall goal which is to prepare our students for college and career-ready jobs. We also seek to create a model environment where students can cultivate a love and appreciation for nature, understand the delicate balance and inter-dependencies of the environment, and embrace as well as act-on our need to protect and sustain healthy lifestyles at the individual, community, and global levels.

I would like to thank Green Building United (GBU) for their Green School Program as it provides the guidelines and instruments to map and move forward in a coordinated effort throughout each phase of the Pathways. In addition, they have given valuable advice, inspiration, and created a forum for schools in which to share our successes and challenges. I look forward to continuing to work closely with GBU in the future as we evolve as a Green School.