

Bright Ideas

Philissa Cramer | May 27, 2010

Helping Students to Think—and Act—Locally

Lawrence Barnes Elementary School had been sitting near the bottom of Vermont's school rankings for years. Enrolling many recent immigrants, the Burlington school posted low test scores and used a curriculum that bored students.

Then the school reached out to Shelburne Farms. Over six years the nonprofit farm and education center helped Lawrence Barnes remake itself around the theme of sustainability. Doing so meant more than just teaching about environmental issues or encouraging students to recycle, says Matt Dubel, who heads Shelburne Farms' Sustainable Schools Project. It meant fundamentally reorienting teaching and learning at Lawrence Barnes around the idea that the school is part of a local ecosystem—political, economic and, yes, environmental—that students can influence.

Now, instead of writing five-paragraph persuasive essays that only their teachers read, students identify problems in their community—and appeal to Burlington officials to make changes. They've had success: a neighborhood guide for new immigrants written by third graders is now distributed to all refugees who arrive in Vermont. Test scores are up, there's a waiting list to enroll and this past August, Lawrence Barnes became a full-fledged sustainability-themed magnet school—according to Shelburne Farms, the first in the nation.

Lawrence Barnes's transformation happened without a single teacher being fired. Instead, the achievement boost followed naturally once teachers united around a shared purpose and students got hooked on the local focus, according to Dubel.

"We lose a lot of learners because they're disengaged, and they're disengaged because school doesn't seem to have anything to do with life," he says. "If we really connect academic learning with the life of the community—nearby, outside the doors—we connect academic learning to something that's relevant and meaningful to students."

A small but growing group of environment-oriented educators is pushing this vision in schools across the country. Some, such as Seattle's Facing the Future and the New York-based Cloud Institute, produce sustainability-infused curriculum materials. Others, such as California's Green Schools Initiative, train teachers about how to work sustainability into their lessons. Berkeley's Center for Ecoliteracy last year released *Smart by Nature: Schooling for Sustainability*, a guidebook to more than a dozen exemplary programs, including Lawrence Barnes.

"What we wanted to do [with *Smart by Nature*] was to reinforce how much creativity and innovation is occurring across the country," says Zenobia Barlow, the center's co-founder and executive director.

While some schools start by writing sustainability into their mission statements, others don't have to do it that way, Barlow says. "Sometimes it can start with one school garden, with one teacher," she says. "There's no one right way."

A handful of small-scale studies support the idea that a sustainability focus can turn schools around, but for now most of the evidence comes from stories like Lawrence Barnes's. That could soon change: through the national Place-Based Education Evaluation Collaborative, dozens of schools are teaming up to evaluate their own progress. Proponents of sustainability-focused schools say they expect favorable results because the movement rests on firm pedagogical footing.

"Schools are the ecosystems where our children live, where they spend most of their waking hours," says Deborah Moore of the Green Schools Initiative. "Using the school campus as a learning tool is developmentally appropriate for a lot of ages."

"You can do exemplary instruction in literacy and math and science and social studies, but when we help students integrate and apply those skills, we help them build better models of how the world works," says Dubel. "The more the disciplines come together, the better the learning."