



Educating for Sustainability: Looking at One School's Story

by Erica Zimmerman

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Over the years, *Community Works Journal* readers have enjoyed stories that explored on how much meaning the concept of sustainability can bring as an overarching goal for service-learning projects and K-16 curricula. As time goes by we have checked in with some of the teachers and schools who have been exploring these concepts in greater depth. We posed the question “What difference does it make to use the big idea of sustainability in your school, your courses and your service-learning projects?” Engaging in education for sustainability (ESF) does take work—from professional development to community collaborations—so it’s time to check in on the results. What are the tangible outcomes in student and community achievements? Are there changes in school culture? What are the indicators for school success in ESF? We knew we needed to consider more than units taught or fuel gallons saved. So we began by collecting some qualitative reports to launch this conversation nationally and internationally.

When we say Sustainability, we’re simply using a term that for many cultures represents an age old tradition: “Improving the quality of life for all—economically, socially, environmentally—now and for future generations.”

In this article, we listen to two educators from a large high school in Vermont, and we’ll look forward to sharing more results from around the country and beyond in coming *Community Works Journal* pieces, as well as on our websites, and in our summer institutes.

Montpelier and Williamstown High Schools are not far from each other geographically, both in Central Vermont, but are quite distant culturally and socioeconomically. I had the privilege of working with a science teacher at each school some years ago, through the curriculum development courses I led for the Education for Sustainability Network. Though these schools are very different, their EFS work—in combination with other school improvement—has supported a growing school culture of reflection and re-envisioning their schools as a whole, by restructuring both the way the campuses work and the way students learn. It’s thrilling to hear sustainability education discussed as such an integral part of school culture and school improvement.

Science teacher Tom Sabo works at Montpelier High School (MHS) in the state capitol. He began to incorporate sustainability as an integrative concept into his environmental applications and biology courses at MHS. We also worked together on a trimester unit on ecological economics. He developed engaging ways for students to learn to use sustainability as a lens for looking at the world in their current events investigations. At the same time, he used a small EFS grant to launch a teachers’ round table study group on sustainability education, which eventually became established as one of the school’s improvement teams with a regular meeting time. The members took turns passing each other’s curriculum through the “lens of sustainability,” looking for connections to foster.

Eventually, they decided to focus their efforts on establishing sustainability as a tangible part of the school through building a greenhouse as an applied science and math project in the summer. This initiative accelerated interest in food, farm and nutrition education. The student Earth Group, led by Tom, simultaneously took off with several citizen-action efforts. Last year, their work reached a new level with a community Hunger Banquet, where kids organized food equity speakers and served local food to raise money to complete the

greenhouse in time to become the primary grower of greens for the lunchroom salad bar. The banquet led to the creation of a Food and Nutrition Council, a highly active group where students, staff and community members work directly together. (This idea of a Hunger Banquet has since found its way to other high schools in the region -ed.)

As Tom says, “Sustainability keeps gaining momentum at MHS.” Top on his list of evidence is administrative support, including not only the principal but also the superintendent, who has become engaged in the past year as a result of the community attention and support. “Sustainability is in the principal’s goals and the district’s mission—from education [goals] to making the buildings more sustainable from an energy perspective. It was brought up right and left in the opening talks at the beginning of the school year.... This kind of institutional support has grown, you might say, in the greenhouse.” It’s a concrete manifestation of the promise of sustainability, of interconnectedness coming to life for students, staff and community.

“My students showed genuine interest, to me that means they are learning,” They said the sustainability stuff was the most interesting. I think that is because it was so ‘hands on,’ and they had ownership. I found tremendous value in seeing the connections between my work and other teachers’ work.”

Tom Sabo, High School Science Teacher

Principal Peter Evans came to MHS just as the sustainability dialogue was beginning. “When you first start thinking about sustainability, it’s fairly heady and can be really complex. Teachers were starting to talk about it in their classrooms, especially in science. And then they started to do something more tangible—improving the school’s composting and recycling—and the students could really relate. It wasn’t that formal, but the big yellow buckets in the cafeteria are a sign of the program that we believe is a great example of that sustainability cycle. The food scraps get sent off to Vermont Compost Company and come back as soil that we used in science and now in the greenhouse. The skills kids learned—setting up the program, weighing the scraps, communicating with the school community—led them to be already ramped up for the Hunger Banquet. The networking they did and their organizing were phenomenal. The kids took it on as their project.

“And that has created big ripples. The whole greenhouse originally worked out beautifully as a hands-on summer program. Now that it’s built and heated and growing vegetables, it’s slowly becoming a classroom for biology classes, where students complete the cycle from food to waste to planting to harvesting to food to eating.”

“The Hunger Banquet has led us to really taking a much harder look at our school food on two strands at once—the quality of the food and the layout of the cafeteria. It’s a wonderful way for kids to value and understand sustainability. We want to restructure both so that we can celebrate food and eating as more important than filling our faces and getting back to class. Before, we had long tables that reminded me of kids in cow stanchions getting their feed. Now, with a variety of tables, we can all enjoy conversation, eating and our break. We’re continuing to look at the cafeteria—hopefully adding some artwork and a small stage for performances at lunchtime.”

“Then, maybe the best example of the work running over through the whole community is the work of the Earth Group, which created cross-curriculum impacts by working with the Food and Nutrition Council on the community read of Paul Fleischman’s *Seedfolks*. Even my whole family read it!”

When Peter reviews the next steps for sustainability learning at MHS, he focuses on the challenges of such cross-curricular connections. To facilitate more service-learning, Tom Sabo initiated a new model for co-teaching one course with the community-based learning coordinator. They hope this model will work for teachers of other disciplines as well, who haven’t yet seen sustainability as a “viable area of interest because they don’t have as many tangible tools and processes as science.” Peter says, “This is a discussion we really have to have to inspire sustainability focus in other disciplines. I’m also interested in sparking a discussion of teaching and sustainability, using the work of Parker Palmer. (www.couragerenewal.org)

“What’s unique about this [sustainability work] is the dialogue that comes with the understanding of sustainability. It’s more far-reaching than [dialogue] about today’s projects, [it’s] about the legacy of impacts seven generations from now. I really hear that conversation among the kids. I love the kids.... It’s the way they are that allows us to accomplish what we can. It’s a gift we have...”

“And this discussion—of engaging kids in sustainability, in school, and about what our school is—is helping us in our big undertaking in reflecting on what our school will look like in the next four to seven years. We have a pretty good idea that it’s going to look like a very different high school when we’re all done. We’re working seriously with students to reflect on what it would look like if kids were taking more ownership of their learning in their final two years, after a more structured freshman and sophomore year. In both working on sustainability and restructuring our school, we’re really trying to find out what to do.” □