

United States Joins International Effort to Green School Buildings, School Grounds, and Curriculum

November 23 (Reston, VA) -- As the recently-approved United States host of the international Eco-Schools program, the National Wildlife Federation has started recruiting public, private and charter K-12 schools in the U.S. to participate in the school greening movement and in improving environmental education.

The new Eco-Schools USA program is part of a rapidly-growing international network of 30,000 schools in 47 nations worldwide. The program deploys teams of students, administrators, teachers and community volunteers at each registered school to make their buildings, grounds and curriculum more green while making students more environmentally aware.

“This holistic program integrates greening school buildings and grounds along with environmental learning,” said Laura Hickey, Senior Director of Global Warming Education for the National Wildlife Federation. “This approach enhances student environmental awareness, understanding and stewardship.”

One of the major benefits of the Eco-Schools USA program is its ability to improve students’ academic performance, especially in science and math. Research has shown that students of all economic, racial and cultural backgrounds that are engaged in hands-on applied environmental education have an increased desire to learn, and perform better on most measures of student success.

“When I taught kids math skills like measuring, in the classroom, they forgot it and couldn’t make use of it. When the students had a chance to use these skills on our nature trail, they not only learned better but could apply and remember their math skills longer,” said Kim Flynn, math teacher at Jackson County Middle School in Kentucky.

Another example of “math and the environment in everyday living” is being taught at Country Day School, an Eco-School in Savannah, Georgia. There, the school has a 2000 gallon cistern that collects 50 percent of the rain water from the roof of the building. Students are taught how to measure the amount of collected water and how to determine the amount used to care for the school’s 450 sq. ft organic garden, fill the ponds and wash down the outdoor classrooms. By teaching students how to calculate the water bill, they will appreciate the cost savings to the school from using the collected rain water. “We expect our students to be leaders in the wise use of our earth’s resources,” says William Eswine, educator at the school.

Environmental education is also associated with improved critical thinking skills. A study of 401 9th and 12th grade students in Florida found a strong positive correlation between

participation in environmental-education programs and higher achievement on tests that measure critical thinking.

At the Green Woods Charter School in Philadelphia, one of the first schools to register as a U.S. Eco-School, teachers use the environment as a tool to integrate teaching and learning across disciplines. Educators at the school believe it's a way for students to apply their thinking, learning and problem-solving skills.

In the state of Washington, schools with environmental education programs consistently showed higher test scores on state standardized tests in math, reading and writing. Overall, students exposed to environmental education tended to improve their GPAs, stay in school longer, receive higher than average scholarship awards, and display more responsible behavior in the school and community.

At the United School District and United High School in Armagh, Pennsylvania, biology and environmental studies teacher Robert Penrose says Eco-Schools USA is a way to "take our current programs and increase the scale of what we are doing." They have a school-wide recycling program, a small composting project and continue their "Trashin' Fashion Show" every year, which showcases student-created fashions that are made from materials that would end up in landfills. They are planning a "Take Back the Earth" conference for all school districts in Western Pennsylvania to assist other school in implementing programs like those at United.

"Our Eco-Schools USA program empowers the students to realize they can make a difference in this world," says Penrose. "The students develop leadership skills and learn life-long habits they can pass on to others."

In addition to the academic benefits of the Eco-Schools USA program, participating schools can also realize financial savings, decrease their carbon footprint, reduce school waste, and lower their energy and water consumption.

The Boston Latin School is planning a green roof project as part of their Eco-Schools USA action plan. The outdoor learning labs proposed for the roof will allow students to collect data about carbon reductions and energy savings and post them online so they can monitor the progress of the green roof. School teacher Cate Arnold says "students are gaining incredible leadership skills along with project organization and management know-how, great assets for any student's future success."

U.S. Eco-Schools are everywhere, including inner-city schools. Barbara Murphy, a teacher at inner-city Westlawn Middle School in Huntsville, Alabama, says their Eco-Schools USA projects helps students develop ownership and pride in what they are doing. Educators at Westlawn want the outdoors to become an important part of the school's education process. "Hands-on, real-life learning gives students what they often do not get when so many classes are "taught for the test," says Murphy.

The Eco-Schools program has been around since 1994, developed by the European Commission and run under the auspices of the Foundation for Environmental Education, headquartered in Denmark. It has been identified by the United Nations Environment Program as a model initiative for Education for Sustainable Development Eco-Schools.

Through NWF's Eco-Schools USA program, schools across the globe can network, share ideas, and discuss projects. Students can communicate on the Eco-Schools USA Facebook page where they can post photos of their projects and comment on environmental issues facing the globe.

Once a school registers, it works toward achieving one of three award levels: bronze, silver and Green Flag. Each school is required to establish an Eco-Schools USA action team and eco-action plan which must involve the entire school and surrounding community. To earn an award, schools can select from among eight pathways, including water, transportation, climate change, and consumption and waste. All schools must complete the energy pathway. One new and unique pathway created by the National Wildlife Federation is the "Green Hour," which strives to get kids outside to enjoy the many benefits of being surrounded by green spaces.

NWF was chosen as the U.S. host for Eco-Schools because, according to the Foundation for Environmental Education, NWF has numerous conservation and education resources to contribute to the program. The Eco-Schools concept fits well with NWF's work to promote environmental education, connect people with nature, and raise awareness about the threat from global warming.

To learn more about Eco-Schools USA or to register as an Eco-School, go to www.nwf.org/ecoschools

Note to Press: Names of registered Eco-Schools and contact info for those schools can be provided by NWF.

Media Contact: Liz Soper, NWF Associate Director of Eco-Schools, 802-552-4328 or Laura Hickey, Senior Director, Global Warming Education, 703-438-6289