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## VT: Food for thought at an elementary school



Hands on learning helps students bridge linguistic and cultural divides.

Photo courtesy of Shelburne Farms Sustainable Schools Project

**Summary:** Working hard to engage the community, teachers, and parents has had a positive pay-off for Lawrence Barnes students. Integrating the Shelburne Farm's (VT) Sustainable Schools Project into the school curriculum has helped students connect classroom lessons to real life and made tangible how students can wield their own power to affect change. As an added bonus the project also helps English language learners bridge linguistic and cultural divides.

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At Lawrence Barnes Elementary School (K–5), located in the Old North End of urban Burlington, Vermont, it's not unusual for a chicken to make a guest appearance in the classroom or for students to be out canvassing the neighborhood looking for ways to improve its safety, cleanliness, and amenities.

Working with the Shelburne Farms' Sustainable Schools Project, Lawrence Barnes has forged a successful partnership with the community to reinvigorate its curriculum and plant the seeds of knowledge about healthy living and responsible citizenship in its students. In the process, it has uncovered a wealth of willing hands to help propel this small urban school and its low-income, culturally diverse student body of 160 forward.

### Opening the door

The Sustainable Schools Project (SSP) is a model for school improvement and civic engagement sponsored by Shelburne Farms, which is a working farm, nonprofit educational center, and National Historic Landmark. SSP works with school partners in Burlington to integrate concepts of sustainability into the curriculum, develop community partnerships, foster collaboration, and improve campus ecology. Its goals are to improve communities economically, environmentally, and socially.

Lawrence Barnes is the second pilot school where SSP has applied its vision to an urban environment. Its sister school, Champlain Elementary School, recently completed a three-year SSP cycle. The success of SSP at Champlain plus a collaboration of two teachers from Champlain and Barnes with SSP staff on a summer

science camp laid the foundation for the SSP partnership with Barnes.

Paula Bowen, principal of Lawrence Barnes explains the motivation for forging this alliance begun in 2004, "Introducing the concept of sustainability as an organizing principle on a school-wide level seemed like an ideal way to achieve our goals of finding new ways to address the educational needs of our very diverse student body, strengthening our relationships with the community, and enhancing our community visibility." SSP also complements the work of the district-wide Burlington School Food Project, of which SSP is a key member, in introducing healthy and local food into the school cafeteria and of integrating food, farm, and nutrition (FFN) into the curriculum.

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### Planting sustainability in the curriculum

One critical key to the success of this type of project is bringing teachers on board. Jen Cirillo, SSP Coordinator, says: "Many teachers are open to integrating concepts of sustainability into their curriculum,

District Characteristics
Name: Lawrence Barnes Elementary
State: VT
Type: Urban
Grades: K–5
Enrollment: 152
Students per teacher: n.a.

Enrollment Characteristics
Economically disadvantaged: 98%
English language learners: 12.7%
Students with disabilities: 13%
White: 52.7%
Black: 28.3%
Hispanic: n.a.
Asian/Pacific Islander: 6.6%
American Indian/Alaska Native: n.a.
Other: n.a.

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but they don't know how to do it. They're also worried about time and meeting standards." SSP works with a familiar format, the Understanding by Design template, a district-wide planning tool, to integrate sustainability into the current curriculum using topics that interest teachers and that will excite students. "We're also helping teachers to meet Vermont standards on sustainability and place, as well as other standards. Once they understand that SSP is not creating 'add-on' work, they get excited about the idea. And when teachers see how well the students respond the idea sells itself."

Source: [SchoolD](#)

Angela McGregor, SSP Educator, meets with teachers at the beginning of the school year to pinpoint areas where sustainability topics can be built into their lesson units. During the year, she models and co-teaches lessons for them, provides in-class mentoring, coordinates classroom activities with community educators and fieldtrips into the community. In-school support is supplemented with for-credit, summer professional development workshops focused on topics such as sustainability, service learning, place-based learning, and civic engagement. "We offer teachers a variety of assistance so that everyone finds some aspect of the program that feels comfortable," says McGregor.

Despite some initial trepidation about working with outside educators, Lawrence Barnes teachers have embraced the idea and welcome the assistance. Second-grade teacher, Deidre Morris explains, "When you start the curriculum process, you wonder how you're going to do it. The ideas, however, just start to flow especially when you're working with such creative and supportive educators as the SSP staff. They bring the community right into the classroom. Once you've got that network, it's easy to make the contact yourself the next time and also to expand your contacts."

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## Making it real for students

High-interest sustainability topics such as food, farm, and nutrition (FFN), life cycles, and community featuring guest educators from the community have scored a hit with teachers and students alike. Students grind wheat and bake bread in the classroom with guest chefs, learn about "eating the rainbow" from a member of the local co-op, City Market, and investigate community design with a licensed architect who worked with the art teacher to integrate the topic into the art curriculum.

Many Barnes students have special education needs or are just learning English (twenty-eight different language groups are represented, reflecting Burlington's status as a national refugee resettlement city). "Our kids need the hands-on learning experiences that SSP brings. It's just great to see how excited the students are about this style of learning," reports first-grade teacher Julie Brown whose seed and vegetable science unit, "Cycles in the Garden," included an in-class GrowLab® that produced plants for the school's raised garden beds. "When students are interested in and connected to the content, they're more likely to read about a topic and want to know more. Students who tend to act out in class are less disruptive and more engaged in learning."

Integrating sustainability concepts into classroom activities also promotes and reinforces basic skills acquisition. In-class sessions with local farmers, each of whom brought in a fruit or vegetable for investigation, led to students' creation of informational posters that are now posted in the local co-operative market's produce section. "These sessions reinforced our on-going literacy integration efforts focused on non-fiction texts. By meeting neighborhood farmers and creating posters with them, students not only applied their literacy skills, but shared their learning with the broader community," says McGregor. Sustainability literacy kits developed in conjunction with the district literacy coordinator enhance classroom texts.

A unit on chickens also created a surprising opportunity for students to bridge linguistic and cultural divides, according to Brown who team-taught this unit with colleague Julie Benz. "We had no idea that the Bantu students from Somalia have such an amazing depth of knowledge about chickens from their experience raising and tending them in the Kenyan refugee camps where they lived. They'd been very quiet in class, in that silent phase that students just learning English often experience. When Angela McGregor brought Speedy, the chicken, into the classroom, they started telling the other students everything they knew about chickens. They became the experts and teachers that day."

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## Developing a sense of place

By expanding the learning laboratory to the schoolyard and community through service-learning projects, students connect classroom lessons to real life and learn about their own power as citizens to make an impact on their natural and social environments. Barnes students have become important spokespersons for sustainability and its benefits—and they also get results!

Fourth and fifth grade students who started a successful school composting program with the help of community partners, Chittenden Solid Waste District and Intervale Compost Products, presented their findings at a town meeting to city officials and several hundred residents. After students led them in a rousing cheer about composting, the adults learned how the plates, cups, and utensils used for snacks could be recycled and turned into compost. Students later created a public service announcement about composting with a local station, CCTV.

Students in the Healthy Neighborhoods/Healthy Kids Project, a joint SSP and Vermont Forum on Sprawl (now Smart Growth Vermont) initiative, successfully petitioned the City Council for a "School Zone" sign as part of their assessment of needs in their Old North End neighborhood. In December 2005, their efforts to develop projects that encourage better health, safety, exercise and community building resulted in receipt of the Governor's Award for Environmental Excellence and Pollution Prevention.

Cirillo notes that: "Place-based education paired with service-learning projects really helps students gain a sense of themselves as agents of social change and prepares them to be good stewards of the environment throughout their lives." In a low-income community where students often feel that they have little control over their lives, this connection helps build self-confidence as their voices become heard.

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## Creating a supportive network

School-wide initiatives need long-term cheerleaders at every level. Inviting the community into the school to join in creative activities seems like a simple way to generate support, but it's one that's often overlooked says Principal Bowen.

The school's perennial, vegetable, and habitat gardens have proved to be a magnet for community involvement. The National Wildlife Federation certifies the entire schoolyard as a community wildlife habitat garden. Students work with University of Vermont students, master gardeners, teachers, parents, and volunteers to build and care for the gardens. "Gardens are perfect outdoor classrooms for teaching students about life cycles, ecology, and the environment," according to Jim Flint, Executive Director of Friends of Burlington Gardens and the Vermont Community Garden Network. "When the community is involved in their establishment and care, the gardens tend to have staying power."

Parents Nights became Family Nights by linking classroom and school activities to the events, which have witnessed increased attendance. "We found that parents and relatives are more likely to attend school events and get more involved if their children are included," notes Bowen. "It's a more engaging experience when students are leading their parents in a Quality of Life Index exercise or sharing their muffin recipe. Food itself is a great way to draw in community members, especially those with limited English. You don't need to speak English to bring your favorite dish to a school dinner."

Siobhan Donegan, a registered dietician and Parent Teacher Organization (PTO)/Food and Wellness Committee member, says that an active PTO is critical to promoting school initiatives and generating community involvement. "Through our outreach efforts, we obtained a small grant to promote healthy foods and lifestyle. Now, we serve fresh local fruit, vegetables and grains at all family-oriented events. During the spring break, we organized an art camp for students who worked with local artists on a series of murals about healthy eating and food that now hang in the cafeteria. We were so impressed by students' classroom cooking activities that our community dinners now feature food that they prepare."

Last year's school-based community dinners—one that celebrated the school's rich cultural diversity and the other that featured the Intervale Center, the local sustainable agriculture center—each drew 150–200 community participants, some who had never come to the school before.

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## Looking to the future

As Lawrence Barnes enters its final year of partnership with SSP, what does the future entail? "We'll have some challenges," says Bowen, "but our staff has taken ownership of the concept. Our students love the tangible, place-based learning approach. We've developed strong partnerships across the community, and more parents and community members are involved each year. SSP has given us the tools to sustain this project well into the future. There's even discussion about Barnes becoming a magnet sustainability school for the district."

In fact, in August, parents, community volunteers, and students gave the schoolyard a facelift, replacing the knee-skinning playground gravel with wood chips, planting new grass, and replacing rotted wood retaining walls. Students worked with parents to paint a colorful mural of children's faces and flags, modes of sustainable energy and transportation, gardens, farms, and mountains. Lowe's Home Improvement, the city's Community and Economic Development Office, and Alderson Environmental Services provided the funds. What got the initiative started? A student assessment of what could be done to improve the school.

### Lessons Learned

- Empower the community to help you by opening the doors of your school and by inviting the community to participate in the life of the school on daily basis advises Paula Bowen.
- Community organizations and educators bring knowledge, expertise, and contacts that enrich the classroom. "I learned that there are more people out there than I realized who are willing to come into the school and classroom to help. If you can find one core group to work with you as your base group, that's an excellent start," observes first-grade teacher, Julie Brown.
- Concepts of sustainability need to be integrated throughout the curriculum and built into all school activities for maximum impact. "The concept of sustainability, whether focused on food, the environment, or social issues can't be an add-on. It has to be the filter through which everything is seen so it becomes just a normal part of what you do as a school," observes Bowen.
- Listening to the teachers' needs and concerns, as well as being flexible and respectful, is critical to building a successful partnership with an outside organization, says SSP Educator Angela McGregor. For example, a planned unit on "forces of change" turned into a geology/social studies unit focused on Vermont Native Americans, the Abenaki, their culture, tools and technology, with an Abenaki guest educator, because those topics are better suited the students' curriculum needs and the teachers' interests.
- Involving community members and businesses in the classroom and in extracurricular activities takes planning, coordination, and good communication. "Individuals and businesses are very busy so you don't want to waste their time. It's important for community partners to understand how what they do fits into the curriculum and how they will participate. Help partners prepare for their role, set them up for success, and express your heartfelt thanks for their expertise, support, flexibility and creativity," McGregor advises.

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This story was written by Susan H. Stafford, Ph.D. Stafford, a freelance writer and anthropologist from Alexandria, Va., is the author of *Community College: Is It Right for You?*, published in June 2006.

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