

Butterflies and being kind:
**An elementary school
embraces the Earth Charter**

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Introduction

At the start of the year everyone at school will come together and we'll ask ourselves "How do we want to enhance our commitment to the Earth Charter?" We have a million ideas! And by using all the Earth Charter's principles we'll have topics for the next sixteen years...

Renee Kok, Head of School

⁴⁴ Education programme advocate, YES! Magazine, Bainbridge Island, Washington, USA.

The students and staff at Voyager Montessori Elementary School are living the Earth Charter's principles inside and outside the classroom by working together to create a peaceful, healthy, ecologically diverse, and sustainable environment on their 3.5-acre campus in Washington State. The school officially endorsed the Earth Charter on Earth Day 2007 in a day-long celebration with staff, students, and parents after spending the academic year engaged in projects guided by the Charter's principles.

Voyager Montessori Elementary School (Voyager) has capacity for 44 students in kindergarten through sixth grade (K–6), and six staff members: four teachers and two administrators. The school follows the Montessori Curriculum, designed to “educate the child for life” by providing children with the tools to be independent learners, build self-esteem in a safe environment, develop social skills, find peaceful resolutions to conflict, understand the democratic process, honour individuality and diversity, and instil respect and responsibility for the earth and all living things. These goals are complementary to the Earth Charter's major principles of respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, and democracy, nonviolence, and peace.

The staff of Voyager were introduced to the Earth Charter when they attended a workshop entitled, “The Earth Charter: Local and Global Connections for Earth Day” held for 70 K–12 educators in March 2006. The programme was co-presented and sponsored by YES!



Children learning about waste management.

Magazine,⁴⁵ Facing the Future: People and the Planet,⁴⁶ and the World Affairs Council.⁴⁷

YES! Magazine and its partners have offered two such workshops on the Earth Charter for K–12 educators (one in 2006 and one in 2007). Workshops lasted three to four hours and provided teachers with an overview of the Earth Charter's history and principles; a copy of “The YES! Earth Charter Reader + Guide” (see Box 3); hands-on practice using Facing the Future lesson plans; and a PowerPoint presentation on global climate change with an extended question-and-answer session with an international expert on carbon issues from the University of Washington.⁴⁸

After attending the workshop, the staff decided to incorporate the Earth Charter's principles in their school by adapting the materials in “The YES! Earth Charter Reader + Guide” and by adapting the Earth Scouts' version of the Charter's principles: (1) play fair and learn to share, (2) love nature and clean up your mess, (3) everybody matters so be kind to others, and (4) always shake hands and make up, everyone deserves to be heard.⁴⁹

Voyager's staff also saw Al Gore's movie, “An Inconvenient Truth,” and felt increased urgency to address environmental issues, yet in a manner appropriate for their young students. According to the Head of School, “We wanted to inform the kids about the issues, but not scare them or leave them feeling threatened.” So they created projects focused on positive solutions to problems, and on taking action within a community that the students could control—their school.

⁴⁵ YES! Magazine is an advertising-free quarterly in print and online at: <http://www.yesmagazine.org>. YES! is published by the Positive Futures Network, an independent nonprofit organization. YES! offers stories about solutions and resources to support people in building a just and sustainable world.

⁴⁶ Learn more about Facing the Future: People and the Planet, at: <http://www.facingthefuture.org>. Facing the Future offers lessons and resources for teaching about sustainability.

⁴⁷ Learn more about The World Affairs Council at: <http://www.world-affairs.org>. The World Affairs Council is a membership-based organization that creates forums for discussion of critical world issues.

⁴⁸ Dr. Richard Gammon is a Professor of Chemistry, Professor of Oceanography, and an Adjunct Professor of Atmospheric Sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle, Washington, USA.

⁴⁹ Learn more about the Earth Scouts at: <http://www.earthscouts.org>.

Box 3: The YES! Earth Charter Reader + Guide ~ bringing the Charter to life

The YES! Earth Charter Reader + Guide is designed to introduce teachers and students to the Earth Charter through inspiring, positive, solution-oriented stories about people, in the US and around the globe, who are creating a more just, sustainable, and peaceful world. Stories highlight youth as leaders and impart the message that young people are making a real difference in shaping a better future for all. **The 60-page guide includes:**

- The full text of the Earth Charter
- One YES! Magazine story about how the Earth Charter was created, written by Jan Roberts, director of Earth Charter US, Earth Charter Communities Initiative, and Earth Scouts
- Four stories from YES! Magazine (www.yesmagazine.org), each one paired with a major principle from the Earth Charter
- Four standards-based lesson plans with resources from curricular experts, Facing the Future: People and the Planet (www.facingthefuture.org), each one paired with a major principle from the Earth Charter
- An annotated resource guide and service-learning reference section
- An example of a YES! story paired with an Earth Charter principle

The Earth Charter principle 'Ecological integrity' is brought to life through the YES! story, "Bringing biodiesel from Colorado to Colombia," which tells the story of a group of university students who powered their schools' buses with biodiesel from recycled cooking oil. Their learning journey goes global when they accept an invitation to go to Gaviotas, Colombia and participate in a local biodiesel refinery project. They also learn about the social and economic impact of environmental work, and the need to serve a community's broader needs.

To learn more about how YES! Magazine promotes the Earth Charter through the "Earth Charter Curricular Module" online, visit <http://www.yesmagazine.org> and click on "Education Connection." The YES! website offers free access to thousands of stories, special web-only content and practical resources for getting involved. View stories in Spanish by visiting "YES! Online: En Español" on the YES! homepage.

Methodology and activities of Voyager elementary school

The Montessori philosophy of education fits with the UNESCO vision for educating in support of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) with methods that are constructive and participatory; approaches to new material that are integrative and multi-disciplinary; and hands-on activities that are context specific and action-oriented.



Learning different skills.

Voyager organizes their kindergarten–6th grade learners into two multi-age classes, juniors and seniors. The teachers are experts in instruction and subject matter, and approach teaching through facilitation and encouragement, nurturing their students' natural curiosity and joy of learning.

Teachers already had a full curriculum planned, so rather than creating a separate programme to introduce the Earth Charter, they looked for ways to include the principles within their established "all-school curriculum" – weekly activities that all grades participate in together, such as gardening, reading, and art. The Head of School did not create extra requirements for teachers and tried to fold discussions about projects into existing staff meetings. They looked for meaningful and collaborative activities that embodied the Charter's principles while also supporting their school's goals. They continually solicited student ideas, and by assessing together what they were learning and why it mattered, students were constantly shaping the curriculum.

The "all-school curriculum" programme offered several hours a week for lessons and activities. Experts from the community were invited to the school to help staff and students gain specific knowledge and to learn new skills. For example, they taught staff and students how to make 'bokashi' (bran, molasses, and microbes mixed with food waste to create compost), how to build a garden and enrich soil, as well as how to choose the appropriate flowers and plants to attract an endangered butterfly to their garden. They also learned how to build two raised strawberry beds and then care for the soil and the berry plants, as well as how to raising butterflies and bees and create places for them to thrive on campus.

These activities developed organically from the discussions at the beginning of the year, when students envisioned and described 'a perfect world.' After creating a list that included everything from "more trees and less pollution," to "no war and more teddy bear hamsters," students spent the school year bringing their vision to life. Guided by the values of loving nature, helping people, and being peaceful, **the students engaged in the following activities:**

- Recycling paper, plastics, and glass
- Using less water
- Composting their food waste
- Building bee boxes and incubating an endangered butterfly species
- Planting a garden to 'invite pollinators' into their ecosystem
- Constructing two strawberry beds to honour the historical farmers of the school's land
- Supporting local artists by showcasing their work and then making recycled gifts (shopping bags, greetings cards, flower seed and dried herb packets, lavender sachets)
- Writing and presenting poetry about peace with each other, their parents, and elders in their community
- Drawing and sending handmade peace cards to one school in each of the 50 states to serve their wider 'circle of kindness'
- Sending vegetable seed packets to a village in Ethiopia

In their own way, students learned that the Earth Charter's principles of ecological integrity, social and economic justice, and peace were interconnected. For example, when the students wanted to act on their vision of a perfect world by creating less waste, they collected their garbage for 24 hours, analyzed it, and determined it was mostly food scraps. So they composted the food waste and used it to enrich soil in the schoolyard.

Meanwhile, students were learning about the history of the school's property and found it had been a strawberry farm owned by a Japanese-American family. During WWII, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Americans of Japanese descent were sent to internment camps and Bainbridge Island was the first place to evacuate its residents. To honour the historical use of their land and the Japanese American farmers who once worked there, staff and students built two large, raised garden beds and grew the same Marshall Strawberry that had been grown there before. They reached out to the Bainbridge Historical Society for assistance in

locating the unique berry plants, and after caring for them for many months they harvested the berries and offered them as a 'thank you' to the people who volunteered with the school.

Lessons learned and plans for the future

Teachers chose not to introduce the Earth Charter to students as 'a document to study.' Instead, they asked their students to go through the same process as those who originally created the Earth Charter – envision a better world and identify the values and principles it would take to create it. Voyager students then spent the school year taking conscious actions based on their own values and principles.

At the end of the year the students examined the text of the Earth Charter, and found their own values embedded throughout. They understood that their projects—composting food waste, making gifts from recycled materials, building gardens, raising butterflies and bees, supporting local artists, and creating peace poetry to share with others—were vibrant examples of the Charter's principles in action. After a year of living the principles of the Earth Charter at school, and often at home as well, the students and staff knew they could endorse it with integrity, purpose and a sense of accomplishment.

The programme resulted in many valuable outcomes. Students felt more involved and responsible for the care of the school environment and for each other. The relationship between the school and the local community was deepened. Parents received regular updates about school activities and reported to the Head of School that they felt better able to initiate relevant and meaningful conversations with their kids about what was happening at school. Further, parents supported the Earth Charter-inspired projects by participating in the school's Earth Charter endorsement celebration on Earth Day 2007.

Going forward, the Earth Charter will be the permanent educational framework for Voyager's yearly "all-school curriculum." They will maintain their existing projects, such as composting, and tending the butterfly garden, bees and strawberry beds, and will also undertake new projects as they explore the Charter's different principles.

This year Voyager acted to create 'a perfect world' at their school. Next year the Earth Charter will again guide Voyager as they explore their 'unique island home.' They will study the geology, culture, history, and geography of the island and explore ways to meet their basic needs—food and clothing—through local resources. They may also reach across the globe to find other schools trying to meet their needs within their local communities.

Voyager is passionate about keeping the Earth Charter's vision and principles alive, inside and outside the classroom. "We were all transformed by the experience," said Renee Kok, Head of School, "perhaps the teachers most of all. We were totally inspired by the kids. It felt so good to be working together towards something important. We gave kids tools to make decisions for tomorrow—which is our job—because it is their future."

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