

REFLECTIONS CONTEST

Kenmore Middle School, Arlington, VA, USA

ECI Secretariat, 2011

Introduction

By building partnerships with a local business, schools are finding ways to create and participate in a community of learning for sustainability that allows the lessons learned to extend well beyond the classroom.

Located in Arlington, VA, USA, Kenmore Middle School teaches students in grades 6-8 (ages 11-14) using an enriched curriculum based on the use of the arts and communications technology. The school's mission is to "operate a balanced learning environment of: intellectual; social; cultural; and physical experiences."¹ The school began using the Earth Charter this past year as a framework for teaching students about sustainability. As part of that process, they developed a strong relationship with the Hilton Arlington hotel, located only a few minutes away, a hotel which has not only endorsed the Earth Charter but put it into practice as part of its operations.

Developing the Partnership

In 2007, Vickie Hann, Human Resources Director at the Hilton Arlington hotel, first introduced the Earth Charter and its principles to the staff of the hotel. Since that time, the hotel has

developed an Earth Charter Committee, composed of staff members, that seeks to put the Earth Charter into practice through concrete actions towards sustainability. As a result of these changes, the hotel is now using water and energy more efficiently; incorporating more eco-friendly products and packages into their guest services, including sustainable food menus; and finding ways to increase recycling and reduce waste in every department of the hotel.

In addition to these changes within the hotel, the Committee has sought to build partnerships with the community to promote the Earth Charter and sustainability in their own locale. The Hilton Arlington's relationship with Kenmore Middle School first started through their involvement with another local school, Ashlawn Elementary. A hotel event designed to introduce the Earth Charter to the community caught the attention of Edgar Miranda, the school's principal. Based on a mutual embrace of the Charter's principles, the school formed a committee of faculty and parents to help incorporate the Charter into the curriculum, with support from the Hilton Arlington. For the past four years the hotel and the school have worked together on a variety of different activities as part of their partnership, including

¹ From their website, <http://www.apsva.us/kenmore/>

an annual Silent Auction which is supported by the hotel and helps raise funds for the school.

Because the hotel had become known in the community through its partnership with the elementary school, it was a natural development for them to be invited to participate at the middle school level. When Carolyn Carlson, the PTA President of Kenmore Middle School and mother of two Ashlawn Elementary graduates, invited the hotel to be part of an event they were holding, Vickie and the Earth Charter Committee were quick to respond with their help. They also began meeting with Beverly Coyle and Judy Freeman, two teachers at the school, and Dr. John Word, the school's administrator, to discuss further ways the school and hotel could be working together, and how the principles of the Earth Charter could be reflected in that partnership. These discussions led to the Hilton Arlington becoming involved with the school's annual Reflections Contest.

Methodology

Rather than adding on components to the existing curriculum, the goal was to find ways in which sustainability and the Earth Charter could be incorporated into what was already being done. One such event is the annual nationwide PTA Reflections Contest, which the school regularly participates in. For this contest, students submit a piece of artwork, write a story or poem, choreograph a dance, create a video or write a piece of music, with the winning first place recipients competing at the county, state and national levels.

As part of this contest, each school's PTA invites judges from outside the school to determine

the contest winners. Because of their relationship to the school, the Hilton Arlington was invited to participate, with the Earth Charter Committee serving as the judges. Teachers encouraged the students to connect their essays, written on that year's theme – "Together We Can" – to one of the four main principles of the Earth Charter, though students were given creative freedom to express what they felt most connected to that theme.

Every eighth grade student wrote a reflection, so there was a pool of 100 entries in the contest. From those entries, thirteen were selected for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place, as well as honorable mentions. The winning essays can be found in the Earth Charter's Virtual Library [here](#). Dealing with such issues as gang violence, teenage pregnancy, homelessness, and other important problems, the essays (and poems) demonstrate how these eighth graders believe that "together we can" address these challenges and make a difference in society. The concerns of the Earth Charter can also be clearly seen throughout their essays, as these students write about what it means for the entire community of life to be respected, including animals; the need for social and economic justice to deal with problems like hunger and homelessness; and the commitment to nonviolence that turns teenagers away from the gang lifestyle.

Key Features

Community Partnership

One of the most important aspects of this contest was the way in which it utilized, built, and strengthened the partnership between Kenmore Middle School and the Hilton

Arlington hotel. Instead of being a merely routine aspect of their classes, students were given the opportunity to interact with people from outside the school, and this type of fresh and exciting experience helps encourage learning. Students are not the only ones who benefit, however, as participants from the hotel reported that they themselves were encouraged and appreciated the opportunity to be involved in the lives of these students in ways that they otherwise might not have been able to.

Part of why this partnership has been so successful has been the focus on developing quality, rather than quantity. The approach of the Hilton Arlington is not to have as many community partnerships as possible, but to look for situations where a positive relationship for both parties will be able to develop. The hotel also looks for partnerships where there can be mutual support for the Earth Charter. In so doing, they are able to have an ongoing interaction with the school and build relationships with the students, which drastically increases the value of that partnership for both the hotel and the school.

This focus on building deeper partnerships allows the possibility of “education through example.” Numerous participants reported that the students were learning not primarily from what they said, but from the ways in which they saw them living. By being active in a variety of settings and in different areas of their education, participants from the hotel were able to demonstrate their own commitments to ideals of global citizenship and better communities, and these messages stuck with the students as a result. This learning through relationship and action is an important part of helping students to develop their own passion

and vision for living sustainably in accordance with the principles of the Earth Charter.

Existing Events

One of the main concerns in education for sustainability is that trying to treat it as a new subject, or something which has to be “added on” to existing programs and educational curriculum, can lead to more stress on already strained educational resources, especially teachers. As much as possible, the preferred method is to include sustainability messages in programs which are already happening, allowing the principles to shape education without the need to do more. In the case of Kenmore Middle School, they applied this principle by bringing the Earth Charter into a contest which they have been part of for many years. By mentioning the four main principles of the Earth Charter, and encouraging students to think about their reflections in terms of those principles, students were able to creatively engage with its ethical vision, while the teachers were not required to try to cram more into their own already busy schedules and curricula.

Natural Development

Another important feature for the success of this program was the room for the natural development of the usage of the Earth Charter. Though the Hilton Arlington was very committed to the principles of the Earth Charter, being involved with the Charter was never a requirement but always voluntary. In building the partnership, the Earth Charter Committee would introduce its principles and allow people to engage it for themselves. This included the administrators, like Dr. John Word; teachers, like Beverly Coyle and Judy Freeman; and even the students themselves, who were

shown the Earth Charter and had the option to include it in their essays, but also had the chance to decline.

At every step along the way, it was important to encourage the process and allow it to develop on its own. As Vickie Hann notes, *“When others begin to embrace the EC, it is really important to be supportive, recognize and praise small victories and allow people to flow within varying levels of comfort zones.”* She describes growth with initiatives and actions related to the Earth Charter as “very organic, eclectic and ever evolving.” By allowing this type of natural development, the Kenmore Middle School was able to have a successful event incorporating the Earth Charter, even though it was their first year working with the Charter.

Conclusions

Education for sustainability does not require creating new activities – nor must it solely be the work of teachers and other educational professionals. Rather, as the Kenmore and Hilton demonstrate, finding ways to incorporate the principles of the Earth Charter into the regular curriculum of the school can prove a powerful way of allowing students to explore the possibilities of those principles in their own lives. By engaging others in the process, a community of learning for sustainability is formed, and such a community offers new and exciting opportunities for moving forward in a way that benefits all learners.

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