

Ridge and Valley Charter School: An Experiential Learning Model for Sustainability and Global Citizenship


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“Our relationship with the earth involves something more than pragmatic use, academic understanding, or aesthetic appreciation. A truly human intimacy with the earth and with the entire natural world is needed. Our children should be properly introduced to the world in which they live.”

Thomas Berry





The ECSS for Sustainable Development Education

In response to our rapidly changing climate and the urgent need to address and change humans' current unsustainable relationship to the Earth, the United Nations created Sustainable Development Goal 4: "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Under SDG 4.7, this goal specifies that by 2030, all students should acquire knowledge about sustainable development, sustainable lifestyles, climate change, human rights, equality, peace, and global citizenship.

To help promote education for sustainable development, and to reach this goal, Earth Charter International developed the Earth & ESD School Seal [ECSS]. This pioneering quality seal school assessment integrates an ethical perspective of sustainability with the pedagogical elements and practices associated with education for sustainable development.

The ECSS can be used for assessment to recognize outstanding schools in sustainable development education, or as a framework for improvement to encourage schools to bolster these aspects of their curriculums.



School Profile

Name: Ridge and Valley Charter School

Location: New Jersey, USA

School type: Charter School

School level: Secondary (Kindergarten through 8th grade)

Number of Students: 135

Number of Teachers: 18

Prior engagement in sustainable initiatives: *From the beginning, RVCS was designed and created as a sustainability education initiative to cultivate earth literate humans

***Sustainable Jersey Certified**

***Garden State Green Award Winner - Greenest K-8 School in NJ**

***TerraCycle National Greenest Classroom - First Place**

Prior Engagement with the Earth Charter: None

THE FOUNDING AND MISSION OF RIDGE AND VALLEY

Ridge and Valley Charter School was inspired in the late 1990s by the emerging impulse and wisdom of sustainability and environmental ethics that started taking shape at the time, the same movement out of which the Earth Charter itself was born, and also helped to create. The idea for the school was inspired by, among others, the work of Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, the Ecological Learning Center at Genesis Farm in New Jersey, educators Rudolph Steiner and Maria Montessori, and circle practitioner, Christina Baldwin.

Ridge and Valley was created with one main goal in mind, as Traci Pannullo, one of the school's founders and the current Curriculum Coordinator, articulates, "How can we create an educational experience to empower students to be stewards of the Earth based on love and respect for all of the beings and systems of the planet?" The Ridge and Valley curriculum and program were created from the idea that the Earth is our primary teacher.





The school met this goal through their transdisciplinary, integrated, experiential learning curriculum, all based on the natural world and our mutual connection with the Earth.

The founders wanted students to be immersed in nature, so they built a school surrounded by the New Jersey wilderness, integrated with the landscape and powered, in part, by solar panels. At Ridge and Valley, students learn to live sustainably with the Earth and to appreciate the beauty of nature from the moment they start at the school. The school is also based on seasonal trimesters, and students celebrate the equinoxes and solstices as part of this practice of appreciation.

The curriculum is designed around nurturing four key learning experiences, which Traci identifies as Relating, Exploring, Designing, and Nourishing. These values are integrated into the academic curriculum alongside experiential learning to give students a well rounded education. The academics are backed up by sustainable policies and practices at the school, like the use of renewable energy, rainwater harvesting, and sustainable food systems to promote day to day sustainable living for students.

THE ECSS PROCESS AT RIDGE AND VALLEY

In 2024, a guide [the term used for teacher to represent a more collegial and collaborative relationship with the students] at Ridge and Valley, Maggie Vetter, went to the Earth Charter Conference in Florida, and attended the workshop for the Earth Charter School Seal. She reported that the conference really inspired her, and she felt that Ridge and Valley fit perfectly with the Earth Charter's mission. When she brought the idea back to the other teachers/guides during their "circle practice" [a non-hierarchical, consensus-based decision-making practice], it was met with a lot of excitement. About half the guides became involved in the committee, and soon, many students wanted to get involved too. As she described the process of starting a committee to obtain the seal, Maggie said "The main challenge quickly became, 'How can we involve everyone?'". First, they started an after-school club for students, and then developed a workshop to get students more involved. Then, over half the students between 4th to 8th grade became a part of the committee. Once the committee work began, the school quickly developed a strategy to make many small groups of students, each led by one guide, to split up and democratize the committee process. They assessed their school in light of its adherence to the Earth Charter indicators and core principles. They also worked to identify anything more they could do to be an even better representative of the Earth Charter.

Maggie identified that the main area in which the school could continue to grow was a further commitment to global citizenship. "One of my initial motivations in trying to get the seal was to do something I've been wanting to do for years, to connect our students to people around the globe." They created a workshop specifically for global citizenship, to teach kids from fourth to eighth grade about what it means to be a global citizen. This workshop also gathered more support for the committee and evidence-gathering process.






From the small after-school ECSS club, to the global citizen workshop, to the group committee process, to teaching the younger students about the Earth Charter through child-friendly games, a large portion of the school was involved in the School Seal process in some capacity. The 6 students in the club became the most committed, regularly conducting interviews of staff and students to gather more evidence. Maggie noted the excitement and energy that surrounded the process throughout the school from every age group.

EMBODYING THE EARTH CHARTER BY LETTING EARTH AND COMMUNITY BE THE CLASSROOM:

One of the most unique things about Ridge and Valley is the way that caring for the community, as well as for the Earth, is emphasized as the most important part of the learning experience for students. While they do spend time in the classroom, students also apply the things they learn to actively care for their natural bioregion and their community. In this way, Ridge and Valley embodies the 4 principles of the Earth Charter actively and continually.



An example of this is the year-long Delaware Watershed Study for middle school students. Along with classes on environmental science, hydrology, ecology, and water management, students participate in habitat restoration projects for their own local habitat - the Delaware Watershed. They plant local plants along riverbanks to stop erosion, they participate in wetland preservation efforts, and help to build healthy soils. This unit culminates in a 3-day long trip to Cape May, the endpoint of the Delaware River, where students participate in ongoing scientific research by helping to tag horseshoe crabs that are being studied in the area. Many other practices as well, like the Council of All Beings for younger students [inspired by Joanna Macy and The Work That Reconnects], also encourage respect and care for the community of life and ecological integrity - core Earth Charter principles.

Not only do students learn in nature, but they are encouraged to care for their fellow humans. Students prepare the food grown sustainably at Ridge and Valley, and serve it at local soup kitchens or give it away at free farmers markets. Once students are older, after learning about civics, human rights, and current events, they must fulfil an independent study project, which includes a community service/civic engagement requirement. To fulfill this, students go to city council or state legislature meetings, get involved in local government, ask questions or advocate policies to governors and lawmakers, and many even start their own movements and protests for political goals of their choice. All students also learn about the stewardship of the land by the local Lenape Tribe and its Treaty of Renewed Friendship with New Jersey. Democratic decision-making is encouraged through the “circle practice” for students of all ages, and the community around Ridge and Valley is also encouraged to give feedback and participate in conversations about school improvement. Through these practices, Ridge and Valley beautifully embodies the second two principles of the Earth Charter as well, emphasizing social and economic justice, democracy, nonviolence, and peace.



REFLECTIONS, STUDENT EXPERIENCES, AND RIDGE AND VALLEY GOING FORWARD

Through the Earth Charter School Seal application process, Traci Pannullo identified how important it was for students and teachers/guides alike to take a step back and analyse and identify all the different components of their school. It helped them to understand why each practice they did was important, and to consciously think about everything that goes into sustainability education. Students expressed that the process made them feel motivated to do more to connect with people, with the planet, and for the school community.

At the end of a student's time at Ridge and Valley, in eighth grade, they complete and present to the community a “rite of passage presentation” reflecting on their time at the school and across their learning journey. Maggie Vetter said that almost every presenting student mentioned the Earth Charter process, referring to it as “a really eye-opening experience”, particularly in regards to their learning about global citizenship and global awareness through the ECSS process. Many of the older students will go on to join the Earth Charter’s Emerging Leaders Course to further their involvement and commitment to these principles.

Both Traci and Maggie expressed deep gratitude to finally have this recognition and to have connected with an organization that is so closely aligned with their work. Moving forward, Ridge and Valley is hoping to put more time and effort into re-invigorating the non-profit wing of the school. Their goal is to open up another learning center for all ages, based on the same principles of the school, to teach about ecological literacy and sustainable living.



Would you like to elevate sustainability and transform your school into a place where **SUSTAINABILITY** and **ETHICAL VALUES** matter?

Visit our webpage earthcharter.org for more information or contact us directly at info@earthcharter.org

We look forward to starting the journey and creating a more sustainable planet together with you!