

School grows greener graduates

Dedicated students teachers and staff at Reynolds High School lead the way in environmental education

BY STEVE CAREY, TIMES COLONIST FEBRUARY 28, 2010



Reynolds High School teacher Heather Coey coaxes student Annika Benoit-Jansson, 17, to try some lettuce as they tend the garden at the front of the school. Students Brandon Laur, 16, and Annelise Miska, 17, background, also take part in the school's environmental programs.

Photograph by: Debra Brash, Times Colonist, Times Colonist

Thanks to determined staff, dedicated students and generous donors, things are getting a little greener every day at Reynolds High School.

Over the last few years, the Green Spaces Project has gone from concept to reality, with landscaping, gardening and educational activities transforming areas of the school into welcoming and sustainable micro-ecosystems.

Reynolds's old courtyard was asphalt and concrete with no shelter from the sun or elements. It was so grim, students didn't want to go there. Now, the pavement has been replaced by raised garden beds, new trees -- fig, plum, apple, pear -- and goji and gumi berry bushes. On the courtyard's shady side, seating areas and beds of wild strawberries are planned; on the sunny side, a wall of kiwis is in the works.

It's part art project and part garden, all for the benefit of the students.

"We want to get kids connected with using our land and our space to grow food," says Heather Coey,

the teacher who began the project three years ago.

"I'm a strong believer that if we can get people connected to growing their own food and digging in the dirt, they will be much more open to other environmental things - recycling, driving their car less, those sorts of things - because we all have to eat. If we get people connected through their food to the earth, I think it'll trickle down."

Coey, a leadership instructor, noticed that the majority of her students were interested in environmental projects. So she started a group of students dedicated to green projects. This group came up with the idea for the courtyard improvement. While this was going on, Coey visited a natural species rain garden at Vic West Elementary, and met members of Leadership Victoria, a non-profit that teaches leadership courses, looking for a community organization to partner with. Leadership Victoria members, along with community members, Reynolds students, staff and faculty contributed to a comprehensive plan for the Green Spaces Project.

Funding was obtained through grants, while the work was done by students, staff and community members. For example, where there was once a rocky patch of grass and mud at the front entrance of the school, the natural species garden now grows. It's a Garry Oak ecosystem, planted by Grade 10 science students as part of their ecosystems course unit. Students have also built a compost system and cold-frame boxes in the courtyard, to protect seedlings and small plants.

"We've also created a garden club, made up of staff and students," Coey says. Interviewed in late January, she was looking forward to the group's garden day.

"We're all meeting up, cleaning out all the compost; we're going to harvest our winter turnips, our broccoli and our greens. And we're going to start to plan out planting for spring."

The school and the project are winning more than praise. Money -- in awards, grants and donations -- has helped cover the project's total cost of about \$100,000. Reynolds won a solar power system, worth \$66,000, through a provincewide green competition, and the Green Spaces Project won more than \$16,000 to pay for tree planting. Additional money has come from B.C. Hydro, the Parents Advisory Council, and other organizations.

Though she has taught math, science and leadership, Coey has found her calling in environmental education. She created a curriculum for a course, Environment and Sustainability, that was approved by the school board and the Ministry of Education. She's currently teaching the class at Reynolds, focusing on hands-on learning to educate students about the environment and their place in it. It's the only approved environment class taught in School District 61, which includes schools in Victoria and parts of Saanich.

With the provincial government requiring the public sector, including schools, to be carbon-neutral by 2010, school districts are all taking steps to meet emissions goals.

In SD 61, the Climate Change and Sustainability Committee is planning ahead.

"The first thing the committee did was to develop a policy, and then we made changes as a district --

from purchasing, to facilities, to IT -- each of our departments has come up with its own green plan, from reducing packaging, to green purchasing, to replacing light bulbs to installing low-flow toilets," says Sherri Bell, associate superintendent and a member of the committee.

Going carbon-neutral is a motivator, but the district's green initiatives are driven by passionate students and staff, Bell says.

The district implemented a waste management pilot project in 20 of its 40 schools from September to December, and is waiting for the remaining schools to join. The goal is to have all schools and facilities recycling and composting by the start of the next school year.

"We've lowered our carbon footprint 50 per cent in the last five years, now it's got to go down again. It's the right thing to do, plus we're modelling positive behaviours for children," Bell says.

Custodial staff, she adds, are supportive of the waste management initiatives, and are working with the district on its recycling and composting programs.

Reynolds was the first school in its school district to run the waste management pilot project. Its program is modelled after one at neighbouring School District 63's Royal Oak Middle School, which won a CRD EcoStar Award for waste reduction.

The Reynolds recycling and composting program started with one hallway, where the garbage can was replaced with a bin for compostables and a sorting tower. Soon after, bins for compostables were placed throughout the school.

The results were surprising. Before the organic waste bins went in, only 25 per cent of what was in the trash cans was actually garbage, Coey says. After the organic waste collection began, 75 per cent of what went in the trash was garbage.

In April of last year, another 15 sorting stations went in around the school, helped by an \$800 grant from LifeCycles Project Society, a non-profit in Victoria. Reynolds is surrounded by fast food outlets and coffee shops, so there are a lot of disposable paper cups with plastic lids to get rid of. The way Coey sees it, if Reynolds can implement a waste-reduction program, any school can.

Coey attributes the success of the green initiatives to starting small, first with a community recycling day at Reynolds on the fourth Saturday of each month, a partnership with Pacific Mobile Depots. The depot is now the most popular recycling day in town. It was a step toward building awareness of recycling in the school and community, Coey says.

One thing the recycling program has allowed Coey to do is have a budget for her environmental initiatives and clubs, even in this time of financial restraint.

"I'm not sure how many people would put in the amount of work I've put in to do this. I've spent entire summers writing grant proposals. I've got to co-ordinate 40 volunteers to run the recycling depot," Coey says. "That's a management task in itself, but that's money -- all the money from the recycling depot feeds into our environmental stuff. It's gone to seeds and tools, a DVD and book library on environmental topics I sign out to students and staff; it helped send two students on the Earth Flotilla, a

ship that went around the Gulf Islands and did environmental studies. I have money that other [teachers and programs] don't have, and that is absolutely huge to support our whole range of environmental activities."

Read Steve Carey's blog at timescolonist.com/rethink.

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