

Greening Our City Schools

School Profile: Augusta Fells Savage Institute of Visual Arts



Augusta Fells Savage Institute of Visual Arts is a Title I public high school located in the Harlem Park neighborhood of Baltimore City, in the heart of the west side. Of its 383 9th-12th grade students, approximately 95% are African-American.

The school's first interaction with our programs was in 2013, when their Green Club got a \$1,000 Green, Healthy, Smart Challenge (GHSC) grant for the "Art of Recycling" project. Students collected waste paper, pulped it, and made new artistic postcards. They also used a portion of the funds to take a trip to an environmental center on the Chesapeake Bay.

In 2014, the Green Club greatly expanded their efforts – in addition to continuing their existing projects, they worked with Blue Water Baltimore to install a rain garden and paint storm drains around the school, worked with the Baltimore Energy Challenge to become an Energy Hub School and conduct an energy conservation campaign, and successfully applied to become a Maryland Green School (you can see their Green School website here: <http://afsiva.weebly.com/>)! In 2015, students planted a new schoolyard habitat garden, audited classroom energy usage, and created a booklet to educate middle schoolers about how to save energy and water.

The students from Augusta Fells have been heavily involved in the city-wide Student Environmental Leadership Action Team, creating logo designs and participating in presentations to the School Board. In May 2014, Augusta Fells student Nanyamka Anderson was the keynote speaker at GreenScape, our annual end of year celebration. The soft-spoken teen gave a confident speech to the 300+ GreenScape attendees about what she and her classmates had done at their school and why it was important.

We interviewed Willy Herrera, the teacher who organizes the Green Club (edited for length):

What's your history with greening and with this school?

I started the Green Club with four students who wanted to work on recycling. I got a grant through the Sustainability Office, and that's what I used to start that program. It grew year from year to 4 students, then 10, then 20.

Have others at the school been supportive?

The administration likes it, and the teachers like it so much, especially last year when we gave away organic



whiteboard cleaners and air fresheners. Teachers like the recycling program, they participate well. They like the energy program too, they're aware that they need to shut the windows, turn the lights off. It didn't start off that way, it changed over time, little by little.



The students didn't start off too excited, I had to convince them. I said "this is the money we have, we can use this money." We started the recycling program on just one floor, and that worked well. We took the recycled paper and made postcards, that was the first thing that we did. The first students really liked it, and by word of mouth they were able to convince other students to join us. Now they're more engaged, they like it more. Before, when I said environmental club, some students, especially boys, didn't want to join. They want something where they're going to move, athletics. But then the numbers started growing, and now it's actually mostly boys. It's not just

something where you come to me and we talk and there's a lesson. I put them to work outside, there are a lot of field trips. They like to move, make things, build things.

Have the grant programs been important for you?

Literally, all of the programs are supported by the grants. If I can get some money, it's a reimbursement for what I've already spent. The program is running because of the grants I've gotten from different organizations. Otherwise, we would shut down, because I wouldn't have enough money to do anything. You always need some funds to keep things running. You need to be able to get resources, not just money but information and help.

Any good stories from this work?

A lot of things have changed. We have environmental science classes now, and the after school Green Club is a big thing now. They're the only club that works within the school. You can see the product of what they're doing; you can see their behavior change.

You can easily tell from what you're hearing and observing that there's a change in the students. They make comments like "look at that person throwing trash into the sea." Before, they were not like that. At the beginning, I had a group of 9th graders, and they would throw trash out the window from my car when I'd give them a ride. I explained to them that what they were doing was opposite to what we're doing in school. Now they can tell me, when we walk around, what species of trees are around us. If they don't know, they'll ask if we can learn what types of trees they are.



Have you formed other partnerships through this work?

We're connected to Blue Water Baltimore, the Parks & People Foundation, Cornell University, World Wildlife Foundation, the Baltimore Community Foundation, and the Baltimore Energy Challenge. Cornell University has been

especially great. They offer a field trip scholarship twice a year through their Ornithology Lab. It's a national program, students get to go for two days and stay in a hotel for free. They invite scientists and artists, they talk about the environment, possible career pathways, college. It's a very big opportunity for the students to attend a program at a prestigious Ivy League University. In the fall I took seven students, then another four in the spring, and I'll be taking another four this summer. We also participate in the Genius Olympiad, it's an international competition about the environment. We go for the art competition. Students create a poster, we send it in, and the finalists get invited to go. The accommodation is free, you only have to pay for the fare. The students get to present about their work, and they're exposed to other programs around the world about environmental protection and conservation. This year I have two students going.

Why did you decide to pursue the Maryland Green Schools program?

It's all about the students. At first, I just wanted to start an after school club to expose them to the environment. But once I saw that they were into it, a lot of students were joining, other teachers were positive about it, and the administration was supporting me, then I started thinking about becoming a Green School. I learned about it and said I can do this, the students can do this. That's when I started really working hard, getting a lot of grants, getting a lot of students involved, taking them places, learning more about the process, and connecting to people. Now it's a pride thing, it's prestigious for the school to be a green school. The students really take pride in it, since they're the ones who made the school a green school. It's not the teachers, it's the students moving and making things happen, because without them, no matter how big your ideas are, it won't happen. So, they really take pride in it.

Has your teaching style changed since you've been doing this work?

Before I just focused on the book. After the Green Club started, I learned a lot of things, especially from our Chesapeake Bay field trips. Before, when I taught, I never thought to include the Chesapeake Bay, because I didn't know much about it, I'm not from here. Learning about the environment, going to workshops, and just working outside more really changed how I teach. Now I say "this is what's happening to the Chesapeake Bay, this is what we can do."

Any final words of advice?

Learning from books and workshops isn't enough if you don't put it into practice. Get outdoors and get students involved.



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