

Greening Our City Schools

School Profile: Commodore John Rodgers Elementary/Middle School



Commodore John Rodgers, located just east of Baltimore City's downtown, is a public pre-kindergarten through eighth grade school that serves approximately 707 students. The student population is approximately 65% African-American, 27% Hispanic, and 3% Asian.

Commodore got its first Green, Healthy, Smart Challenge (GHSC) grant in 2012 for recycling containers to support its long-running, student-led recycling program. With a 2013 GHSC grant, they started taking yearly field trips to recycling facilities and

other environmental sites, and produced a "Greenam Style" parody video promoting greening. In 2014, they continued these efforts with another grant, and became a certified Maryland Green School for the first time. Students received their Green School award at the annual Youth Summit at Sandy Point State Park.

We spoke with Carolyn Boitnott, a long-time volunteer, and Tony Krebs, the school guidance counselor, about the progression of greening at Commodore (edited for length):

How did this work get started?

Ms. Boitnott: We started with recycling in the classrooms, maybe seven or eight years ago. I've been volunteering at school for over 20 years, doing whatever seemed helpful. I remember we covered copy room paper boxes with green paper and wrote "recycling" on them, and that's how we got started.

Mr. Krebs: When I started here, that's what we were doing, using those boxes, and then we got a grant.

Ms. Boitnott: Yes, that was the first grant we got from you all, was for blue recycling bins.

Did that make a big difference?

Mr. Krebs: It did, they're larger and they last much longer, we can wash them out. We didn't have as much buy-in then as we have now, it wasn't as organized. We're definitely collecting much more now.



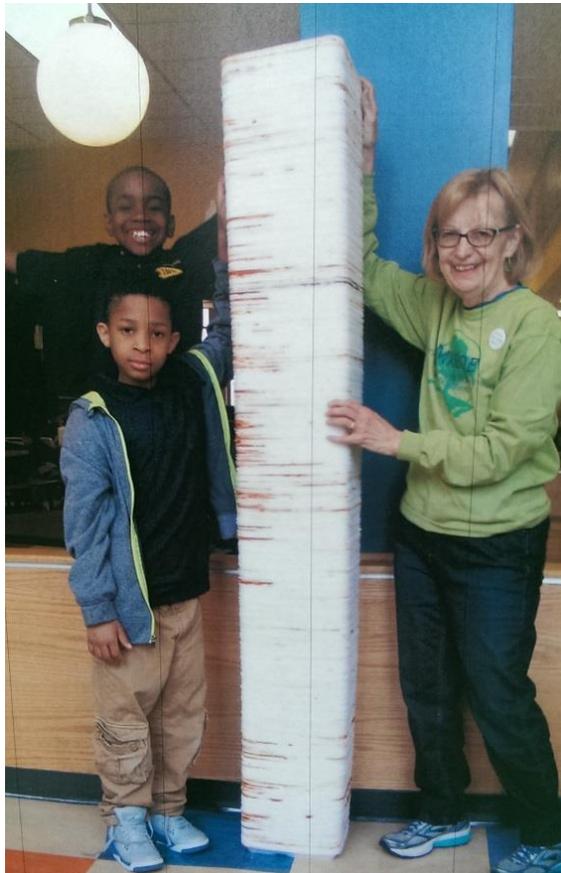
How did you expand from recycling to other types of projects?

Mr. Krebs: We started, like I said, with recycling, we did that for a few years. We became a Maryland Green School last year, that helped promote the idea to the school community overall. There's increased involvement across the grade levels now. This is our first year gardening. We've done field trips, just for the last three or four years. We have students out at North Bay almost weekly. That's been going on for 3 years through our partners at Living Classrooms.

Ms. Boitnott: We've gone several times to the Prince George's County Recycling facility, which does an excellent job with education. We've also gone down to the inner harbor with Waterfront Partnership to see the Trash Wheel. This year, for the first time, we went to Morgan State University. One of our teachers had a friend who was in Landscape Architecture there and offered to help us improve the space by our front door. He worked with his class to develop a plan for us, and then our students came out to see the plan, and also to see their new green building. Our whole Green Team came out, twenty kids, from 5th through 8th grade.

How did the Green Team get started?

Mr. Krebs: Initially, we had teachers recommend students who were responsible enough to help collect the recycling, ones who didn't have behavioral problems and were doing their work, so it was an incentive. They go on these fun field trips, they earn service learning hours, they get to go outside of the school for things like cleanups. And there are usually cookies or brownies!



Ms. Boitnott: Nicholas, one of our big green team leaders, joined the first year that we started, he was in 3rd grade. And he's been a spark. That year, the green team was doing presentations to all the younger classes to explain to them what was going on with recycling, what we were doing and how and why. So I think that's encouraged those students to be more involved as they've aged, both here and at home. It's interesting, because you watch him here at school and you don't see him as a leader per se. He's more of a class clown, but a group of students follow him. He's very committed to being an earth steward, it's very important to him.

What's in the works now?

Ms. Boitnott: If we pull off this garden, which is a major effort, and keep our recycling going, including the Styrofoam recycling, that will be a lot. We hope we won't be doing the Styrofoam trays forever, because the city will get rid of them. That got started because one of our kids, Gary, came to the Student Environmental Leadership meeting when Bob Murrow [head of recycling for the City of Baltimore] was there.

He's a kid who's full of questions, he won't let go of things. Because of him, it triggered my idea that we would do a project about the trays this Earth Day. I wanted to show him that we could do something, but I fully expected that it would be a one-time thing. But Mr. Martin said "We should do this every day", and so we have.

Mr. Krebs: It's a big effort, staff members have to drive the trays to Sisson Street every two days or so.

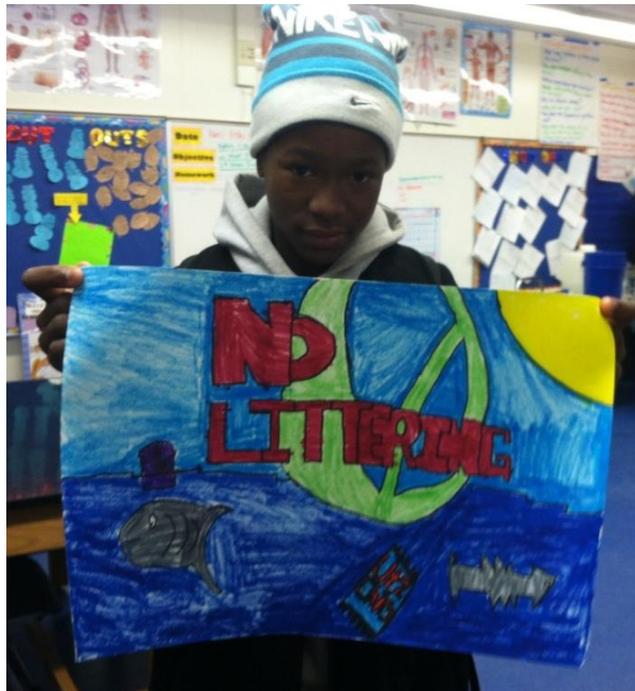
Do you think students and staff are making changes at home because of what happens here?

Mr. Krebs: The current 7th and 8th graders were the 3rd and 4th graders when we started making presentations to them, and now they're much more involved. I think the teachers are more proactive now in talking about Earth Day and sustainability. I think it's part of the culture of the school now. I ask the students if they're recycling at home and they say yes now.

Ms. Boitnott: I know that one of our senior staff members didn't recycle at home before we started coming down hard on people. He was shamed into it.

Do a lot of kids want to be on the green team?

Ms. Boitnott: Yes, it's a problem that we have to figure out, actually. The main thing kids do currently is collect recycling from classrooms, and we don't need 20 kids for that, so I've had to discourage a lot of kids from joining because there won't be anything for them to do. We could have a green team of 100 kids if we had enough activities for them, we need to figure out how to use them all.



Mr. Krebs: We could, there's enough interest. Currently we have one group of kids that collects the recycling from classrooms and takes it to a central location in the school, then we have another group that takes it out from there to the curb on the pickup day. And now that we've got the garden going, we can have a different group of kids to do that. Every week, I have a new group of kids asking me about joining.

Ms. Boitnott: Gary introduced me to a girl in his class and said "she should join the green team, she knows about composting." I guess it's just the cool thing.

How was the Commission on Sustainability meeting that happened here several months ago?

Ms. Boitnott: It was a good meeting, I was proud of our kids. I'd been nervous, Nicholas was wonderful but up until 15 minutes before, I wasn't sure that they'd have it together, the three or so kids who said they wanted to speak. Nicholas pulled the kids together, sat them down, they made a diagram of who would say what. I put together some talking points, but they organized themselves and assigned roles.

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