

## Greening Our City Schools

### School Profile: Digital Harbor High School



Digital Harbor is a public high school located in the Federal Hill neighborhood of south Baltimore City. It serves approximately 1,409 students from around the city, of whom approximately 82% are minorities. Digital Harbor focuses on computer sciences and technology, and, in the 2013/2014 school year, touted one of the highest attendance rates in the city's public school system.

Digital Harbor received its first Green, Healthy, Smart Challenge (GHSC) grant award in 2012, and has received grants every year since then. The school's student-led, grant-funded projects have included expanding recycling at the school, getting a new water line installed in order to start a new school garden, engaging in school-wide energy conservation activities, and installing benches and a bike rack.

We interviewed Nicole Veltre and Kerry Broersma, two of the teachers that have taken the lead on the school's environmental activities (edited for length):

*How did the environmental initiatives start at Digital Harbor?*

Ms. Veltre: One of our Assistant Principals was already involved in environmental stuff. So, we were doing recycling and we worked with Audubon since we started here in 2002. So we kind of got in early on all of those things that were already going on in Baltimore City. When we did the wetlands at Fort McHenry, it was a big political year, so I remember how annoying it was because of that. We were there with all of our kids planting and doing all of the hard work. And then the following day a Howard County group came in and Bob Ehrlich was there, and they got all of the cred and the press and whatever. And we thought that was really messed up.

*When did you start doing on-site work here at the school?*

Ms. Veltre: We were helping with a community cleanup and Jessica [a community member] and I got to talking about a garden. I was like, well, we have a space to put it, let's see what the Principal says. He said yes, that was 2011. So we did the garden with the first grant that I wrote to the Office of Sustainability. I had originally written it for recycling bins, but I found a free place to get the bins. Then we met Chrissa Carlson [a former urban garden design consultant]. I can't remember how we got in

touch with her, but I feel like once you start something, it's this ripple effect. Someone goes, "oh I know someone who has a garden", and that's really how it happens. I convinced her somehow to do this design job for us. I wouldn't have been able to do it without her. I could write grants all I want, I have the community support and all of that, but I had never done such a thing myself.

*When did you start getting volunteer support?*

Ms. Veltre: Because of the way it started, with someone from the school volunteering at a community clean up, the school was in the community. A lot of things organically happened from this, I feel like. I don't think it would have happened that same way if it had not already been a community event. We're heavily linked into the community.

*Have you seen a change over time in the students?*

Ms. Veltre: It depends. Lots of our kids have never seen this stuff. Some of the kids picked radishes yesterday, and washed them off and tasted them for the first time. And it was a brand new thing. They looked at sunflowers. And even some of the adults were like "that's a sunflower plant, you mean like where sunflower seeds come from?" Folks are really discovering things. Seeing the little bird and the babies and the nest, you don't have an opportunity to see that everywhere you go. Some of the girls recognized that there was lavender growing, and it didn't even have the flowers on it yet. We're doing classification and identification in our bio lessons, so we're looking at the features of the leaves and different things. And depending on how kids choose to pay attention, they're getting it.

*What works to get the kids excited?*

Ms. Veltre: Some of them are excited to be outside just because we're outside. But then other kids – one of the kids, his mom home schools the rest of his family and he was like "Oh, we can come up here over the summer?" I'm like, "Absolutely! That would be great, that would be wonderful." And he was talking about how his mom uses garden stuff to teach his brother and sister.

Ms. Broersma: What I've found with the clean-up crew, now that it's the end of the year and it's hotter out, it's harder to get kids involved. With everything going on at the end of the year, prom, work, testing... we have a lot of kids in the fall and the winter, but now that it's warm, they're tired. They're teenagers.

*Do you think the students' relationship to the garden has changed over time?*

Ms. Broersma: I've definitely seen that. If you look at this month's school newsletter, one of my students wrote a piece about what



she's learned, about how working with the community changes your perception of the environment. It's a piece a student wrote, a 9<sup>th</sup> grader, she's awesome.

Ms. Veltre: The more you do something, the more help you have, the more you can do. And if you're not a teacher who can come out on the weekends, that's fine. Because you know our Special Ed Bio teachers and our Special Ed Environmental Science teachers, they bring their kids out pretty regularly.

*Can you tell us a little more about the projects you've worked on here?*

Ms. Veltre: We have a recycle dumpster through Terra Cycle, and another with Pepsi. One of our tech teachers did an energy survey. We have the stickers on every one of the lights switches. Almost every teacher in the building recycles paper. The plastic and can recycling is not as high, but since we've got students with service learning hour requirements, we have teachers that try and support them to do that too. We used to be in ACE, the Assemblies for Climate Awareness, a few years ago. I run a group connected to the Sierra Club that used to be called Baltimore Inner City Outings, now it's called Baltimore Inspiring Connections Outdoors. Our group does one trip a month, and oftentimes we're camping. Any kid can attend that wants to. I write grants for trips like the Snow Goose through the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. We've worked with Audubon since we started the school in 2002. We have an awesome bike program.

*Any particular stories stand out?*

NV: One of the newer kids was recently enrolled in my class. She was homeless at her other high school, and when she was finally not homeless they brought her to Digital Harbor. And she's just a very quiet little girl, but when we went to Outward Bound a few weeks ago, I've got this picture of her like totally beatific. And yesterday in the garden, she was like "Can I pick one?" And then I showed her how to pick one and she's like "What do I do?" If you don't have access to fresh fruit or vegetables or you've never picked your own, it's kind of a big deal to kids. There was another girl, who was here from Mervo. She came out here for the summer program last year, and had a blast, picking vegetables and eating them. And she was like, "Who did this? Like who's idea was this?" And I told her. And she was like, "I want to do this in my school."



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