

# Greening Our City Schools

## School Profile: Hamilton Elementary/Middle School



Hamilton Elementary/Middle School is a Title I public school located in the Hamilton neighborhood in the northeast corner of Baltimore City. Of its approximately 745 Pre-Kindergarten to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students, 90% are members of racial minorities, and approximately 80% receive free and reduced price meals.

The school has a large schoolyard, which for many years was asphalt. Thanks to a partnership with the Parks & People Foundation, the asphalt was removed and replaced with grass about ten years ago. The Hamilton Crop Circle, a

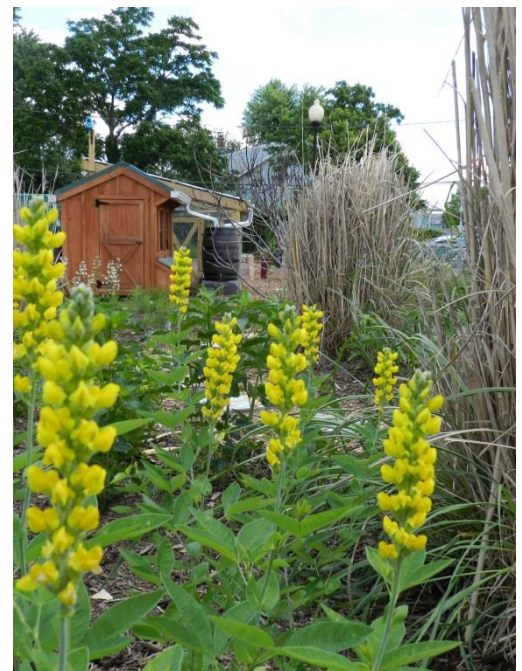
local urban gardening group, uses a portion of the schoolyard space for growing food and educating students. The school's gardens have grown steadily over the years, and now include two outdoor classrooms, complete with seating and weatherproof chalkboards.

The school's first interaction with our programs was in 2011, when their after-school Garden Club and got a \$1,000 Green, Healthy, Smart Challenge (GHSC) grant for the "Berry Beautiful Sculpture Garden" project. Students planted berry bushes and also expanded their recycling efforts. The school went on to get GHSC grants for the following four years running, each time increasing their plantings while also taking on new efforts, like distributing compost bins to neighbors, creating mosaic garden stepping stones, and installing a chicken coop and a shipping container toolshed with its own green roof. Hamilton also became an Energy Hub School through the Baltimore Energy Challenge in 2012, and then again in 2014 and 2015, one of just two schools in the city to participate in the program for three years. Students have created a PSA video about energy conservation, performed a play to the entire school about climate change, and created lesson plans for younger students on the topic of energy. Hamilton is aiming to certify as a Maryland Green School in 2016.

Scott Hartman, the teacher who organizes Hamilton's Green Team, was hired in 2011 as a science teacher. In 2013, thanks to all of the activity around the school's gardens, the Principal allowed him to shift half of his teaching time to a new gardening class during the school day. We interviewed Scott about what's going on at Hamilton (edited for length):

*What are you working on at Hamilton currently?*

When I switched my position to include the gardening component, it became a whole school activity. In the first year, we started with the younger grades, but now it's all the grades. My first goal was infrastructure



building, creating outdoor spaces that could accommodate a class. In the back we have an area with bench seating and a blackboard for the older kids, and in the front we have small picnic tables and a blackboard for the younger kids. Having a comfortable space is in part for the kids, but it also encourages other teachers to get out there. I think it's important to create something that feels familiar and controllable, so they don't just feel like they're standing around in a field.

*Does your school administration support these projects?*

My administration is very invested in the outdoor projects, in great ways. I've worked with other schools where there's a community partner but there's relatively little incentive, especially financially, for the maintenance needed to keep a large garden going. Having a teacher in charge and driving it, particularly one with classes that have a flexible curriculum, is a much better situation. We do a lot of science, but also engineering and math, and then some days we're putting wood chips in the outdoor classroom... it's not always reading or math, but it's making your school a better place, getting kids to invest in their school. I've definitely seen a big increase in the last couple of years in respect and pride for the garden. I made very certain to include as many grade levels as I could in building the front garden because it's an easy target, and if every student planted a plant or painted a fence board, they're invested and there won't be vandalism. So far so good, we've had very little vandalism during my garden tenure, and I'm hoping it stays that way.



*Have the grant programs been important?*

It's crucial to keep the ball rolling. The grant that you guys provide, I've told a lot of other schools about because I think it's a great starting point, it's fairly simple. Once we were able to get the shipping container, we were able to get the plants and soil for the green roof donated from folks in the county, they were more than happy to do so. Once you get the ball rolling, it's easy to get people involved. I got all the tools we needed to fill the shed from Donors Choose, an online giving site. I've gotten grants now from Parks & People, the Chesapeake Bay Trust, and Lowe's. My wife's aunt gave \$1,000 to the garden and she's never seen it, she just hears about it all the time.

*Who else do you partner with?*

Our projects are supported by the PTO and various other organizations. The Master Gardeners helped a lot with creating our outdoor classroom and with plant selection. We created the pollinator garden in partnership with Friends School, they brought juniors and seniors in high school to work with my 5th and 6th graders. This fall, we had a harvest celebration and the Nature Conservancy filmed it, they've brought a lot of cool ideas and unexpected resources. Herring Run Nursery is the best thing that ever happened to my garden projects, they're very knowledgeable and they have a school discount.

*Are the students very engaged?*

I don't think interest could be much higher, at least up through 3rd or 4th grade. Pretty much everyone loves going outside, but the younger grades are more outwardly excited. They talk about it all the time. The older kids, it's a big mix. We have electives twice a week that kids self-select for, there are five students in particular in 7th and 8th grade who are REALLY excited. Every week, twice a week, they'll come and work with me. One year, ten or fifteen of our 8th graders with behavior problems were suddenly thrust upon me during testing time. I took them outside to where we had a few great big fig trees with ripe figs. I tore one off and ate it and they totally lost it, they couldn't believe I'd just eaten part of that tree, they didn't know what it was. So they stopped swearing at each other and came over and we

talked about the tree, about Fig Newtons. Other times, even something like thinning a row of spinach, the kids can really get into, it's suddenly like "oh, I get why we need to do this." They like engaging with the soil and plants. Once we're outside, it goes smoothly, they're engaged.



#### *Any particular stories?*

When I first started here, I had a 4<sup>th</sup> grade special education student whose reading level was very low. When given accommodations, like being read to on a test, particularly in science, he can get A's and B's, but that's not true in other subjects. We had a good relationship but nothing special. Then in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, he had a decidedly bad year. He and the 6<sup>th</sup> grade team did not see eye to eye, his behavior changed in terrible ways. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, this year, things started off much like 6<sup>th</sup> grade, he was not well regarded by basically any teacher in the building. In trying to solve this, his reward for doing a good job and staying in his classes was that he got to come out and work with me when I taught Pre-K and K. To think of

my 7<sup>th</sup> grade self, I don't think I'd have been particularly excited to work with 5 and 6 year olds, but it's working, He's mended fences with a lot of teachers. There was one Pre-K teacher, the first time he walked in, she just didn't want him in her classroom, it was a bad relationship. But she eventually came around to trust him again. He's just so very interested in everything outside and everything science related. He watches a lot of Discovery Channel and similar stations and will tell you endless facts about stuff. He comes to Pre-K and K like it's a job and does a great job with the kids. I hope to continue to work with him in 8th grade and help steer him towards a high school that will help him get to where he needs to be. He's probably been the number one beneficiary of this program. He seems to pop up whenever I turn on my truck, he'll do an hour or so of hard work with me after school on a regular basis.

#### *How has the community reacted to what you're doing?*

When I started here, our school had a bad relationship with many neighbors. That's improved now, people who are walking by will stop in the garden when we're working and talk. Hopefully that will help them give the kids a little more leeway for being kids. The front garden is directly next to our front door, so I see a lot of parents these days. The feedback is universally positive, both from parents and community members. I was worried that the outdoor classroom would create more friction with neighbors, because we'd be near them more and maybe we'd be loud, but they appreciate it, the gardens are gorgeous in the summer.

#### *Have your teaching practices changed?*

I'm doing more applied learning with the kids than I ever had before, because we have something to apply it to. I know that application is a great way to learn and reinforce ideas, but it's hard to make it authentic. You can have students build a tower with straws and marshmallows, but at the end you just throw it away. It's fun, but it doesn't stick around. The students have really enjoyed making their mark on the garden. We did mosaic stepping stones over the winter, which got all the kids invested. I love seeing kids rush to find their stone and show them to their parents, to see the pride they have in it.

