

Greening Our City Schools

School Profile: Lakeland Elementary/Middle School



Lakeland Elementary/Middle School is a public school located in south Baltimore, serving approximately 803 students from pre-kindergarten through 8th grade. The student body is 52% African-American and 40% Hispanic, and 96% of students receive free and reduced price meals. Roughly a quarter of the student population is learning English as a second language. The school focuses on technology, and competes in robotics on a statewide level. Thanks to a multi-year

commitment from the University of Maryland in Baltimore County (UMBC), Lakeland benefits from additional staffing and support for special projects, including greening.

Lakeland received Green, Healthy Smart Challenge (GHSC) grants in 2011 and 2013 to start big new gardens on the school grounds, including six vegetable beds, an herb garden, a wild flower bed, and a strawberry bed. In 2014, with another GHSC grant, the school began a large vermicomposting operation to divert some of the fruit and vegetable scraps from the cafeteria. With a 2015 GHSC grant, Lakeland aimed to amp up its Green Team, creating t-shirts, hats, and buttons for members, and conducting an extensive awareness campaign with signs and posters around the school, as well as greatly expanding their push for recycling. That same year, the school successfully certified as a Maryland Green School.

We interviewed Zach Pechor, the Project Director for the UMBC/Lakeland Partnership, who also runs Lakeland's afterschool STEM program (edited for length):

What have you all been doing here?

Rennie Watson [a teacher] and Brooks Binau [a former Peacemaker through the Shriver Center] were instrumental in getting the green club and



sustainability program up and running. We take students from the middle school grades and they pick up the recycling every Wednesday. They also help out on the native plants garden and will be working on the new native butterfly garden. Rennie wrote a grant for the initial garden project to have all native species of plants, so she keeps that up and running. Brooks and her wrote a grant for the recycling bins for the whole school. Now each individual classroom has their own recycling bin that the Green Lions go in and empty every Wednesday.

I wrote a grant for a garden that will hopefully attract native birds and butterflies from the Maryland area. That grant was given to us from the National Fish and Wildlife Service. So, we're actually a certified Eco-habitat through their certification process. We were awarded the silver award for Eco-Schools which is their program for green school certification. I also aided Brooks and Rennie in applying for the Green School Certification through MAEOE, which we got.



We also did a lot with energy conservation this year. I got a grant through the Baltimore Energy Challenge so that my afterschool kids in third and fourth grades can learn about wind energy and renewable energy. They made model wind turbines and we got to see how much energy and electricity they created, that was really cool. Through that, the two Americorps members from the Baltimore Energy Challenge came in and worked with our 1st grade classes here teaching energy conservation.

Congratulations on all of those certifications!

Our flag's flying high.

Have you seen a big culture shift at the school around greening?

I think a lot of the kids are really kind of thinking about recycling. They haven't really had much of an opportunity before to see these kinds of sustainable measures. They didn't really feel ownership in that before. So, I think that's the really big shift. I think there are a lot of students that really believe in not wasting food. They have a compost bin, a vermiculture bin. And a lot of the classes are like "Well, we shouldn't waste food, let's put it in the recycling." And the recycling, that's a student driven thing. It's a very dedicated group. And since we have the gardens, a couple of the kids really want to plant their own things, seeds and foods and things like that, to grow vegetables. They are more than happy to do that, and to weed the vegetables. It's just a great thing that they're thinking about the larger community and how their actions affect the community and the environment as larger wholes.

Have you seen any culture change in the administration and teachers?

Yeah, we've seen a lot more teacher buy-in for the recycling program and the garden. When we got these grants, a lot of teachers wanted to know how they could help out because we were trying to get Green School certification, and we had a lot of support from the administration to try to get that certification. So it was nice that everyone's on the same page. You're not trying to swim upstream.

Are you seeing various grade levels integrate greening into their curricula?

Yes, and I think this upcoming year we're going to integrate a green committee where we'll all get together and share our common vision for the garden. I know some of the teachers have already claimed a raised bed because we have several raised beds out there. I definitely do see a lot of the teachers taking advantage of the garden space. I know I use it a lot for garden club and in the summer time.

What's been your favorite thing about this work?

I moved here from Denver where I ran a program to get under-represented youth interested and informed about environmental science and resource careers. It was a lot of fun and it was really rewarding because you open up a whole world. A lot of these students don't know what careers are out there. If you really like the environment, and you don't like being inside in the lab, there's a whole host of opportunities. So taking what I observed there and bringing it here and opening up the world as a whole – not just your own community – and really linking everything to show what's possible out there, that's been the most rewarding thing.

Seeing the students design their own wind turbines, using their engineering skills to design the blades, and getting excited when I brought out the box fan and we tested how much power they were creating, that was a really cool moment for me. Having them take ownership of the environment, like, oh, I shouldn't blatantly litter outside, and, hey, there are really beautiful places where you can go to enjoy nature. We just took a trip to Patapsco State Park, it's 15 minutes away, right in their backyard, but some of the kids had never been there before. We went swimming, the kids loved it. Giving them those opportunities, instead of just going to a pool, showing them what's out there, that these are all things right here that you can take advantage of, that's been really rewarding as well. I would love to take the kids to more state parks, so they could see mountains, but buses are expensive, and there's no real money to do that.



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