

# Greening Our City Schools

## School Profile: Southwest Baltimore Charter School



Southwest Baltimore Charter School serves approximately 418 students from kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Located in southwest Baltimore, most of the school's students are from the surrounding neighborhoods, though some come from other locations around the city. The student population is 87% minority.

Like other charter schools in Baltimore City, Southwest is part of the public school system but operates its building and curriculum independently. Southwest's model is based on the principles of Expeditionary Learning, Choice Theory, Arts Integration, and The Responsive Classroom.

Southwest has been especially involved with the Green, Healthy, Smart Challenge (GHSC). Their first GHSC grant was in 2011, for a planter box garden for the back of the school. That year, students also completed an environmental mural on nearby CSX property. In 2012, they got a second grant to expand their gardening efforts to the front of the school. In 2013, they got two GHSC grants, covering a recycling and litter reduction campaign, an educational camping trip in Patapsco State Park with Baltimore Inner City Outings, and a storm drain painting project on the blocks around the school. Most recently, the school has been working with the Parks & People

Foundation, volunteers from Constellation Energy, and an array of other partners to further beautify their grounds and the streets around the school, engaging in asphalt and concrete removal, street tree plantings, and more. Their 2015 GHSC grant allowed students to create new vegetable and herb container gardens.

We met with Marilyn Powell, the school's Director of Development and Special Projects. She has been the lead for much of the greening activity, and we asked her to tell us about how it's going (edited for length):

*Was there any greening work happening here when you started at the school?*

For the first 5 years of schools development, it shared space on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of another school, so there wasn't much opportunity to do anything. When the school moved, it got a whole building and grounds, so it was a terrific time to begin new things. I was hired then and my role was to help us make this building, which had been unloved for several years, a feature in the neighborhood, so people would know we were here and we would be a place where students and families could come safely. Part of the idea of that was that we would make a safe and welcoming environment. Sustainability is a general format for the school, because we're an Expeditionary Learning School, which is a subsidiary of Outward

Bound. Concern for the world of nature is built into the model. So, everyone was involved in the effort to move into new space and make it environmentally friendly, community friendly, and family friendly.

*Where did school start with becoming more environmentally friendly?*

We had a sustainability committee made of faculty and staff, and we looked at what we could do regarding electrical outlets, the type of oil the school used, and other things that concerned us from a safety standpoint.

We had a study done on our air quality right away, and we had the kids engage with it in a very real way, they did science projects around it. We continued to get a lot more input as we went along. Two years ago, the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade science students did a study of natural light and its effects on psychology, and they produced a whole presentation on the light sources in the school and what we could do to make the rooms more environmentally pleasing and better study spaces. From that they developed the solar tube project, which was really fantastic. We located the solar tubes, went to the School Board, and promoted solar tubes not just for our school but for all the schools being redeveloped. As a result of all that we made a plan, we had the roof redone, we purchased ten solar tubes, but that's still where we're at. Unfortunately, it turns out they couldn't go back into the roof to cut holes with the solar tubes without damaging the warranty, even though it had been part of the plan. So, we have them, but they're in a storage space right now and we're not yet able to move it forward.



*Has there been a change over time in the level of involvement of staff?*

Yes, that's mainly because of our schoolyard greening program and our partnership with Parks & People and other. This year, for example, the third grade is doing a vegetable garden in the front of the school. So, their teachers are very intensely involved in that. We're not at the point where we're going to be taking produce to the city markets, but just the idea of using space in the city to grow vegetables and the variety of challenges you face get people -- faculty and staff -- really involved because it's like solving a puzzle. I had a board member say to me once, "Oh, you're getting another green grant?" and I said "well, I raise funds for other sorts of programming too, but this is the thing that has the most immediate impact and is most engaging for students and faculty, there's a lot of bang for the buck."

*How did those partnerships start?*

We got a grant from the Neighborhood Design Center to do a plan for the landscape around campus. Through that, I was able to get some grants to plant trees and do other simple stuff. Now in the spring it looks just beautiful. I got to know the folks at Parks & People through that, we got more involved with Pigtown Main Streets, Ruppert Landscape did a design for the front yard. The Weinberg Foundation redid our library, which looks out on the back of the school, but the back was a wasteland of asphalt, so we engaged in the asphalt removal process which led us to a grant from Parks & People to redo the back of the school. So, all those things just snowballed through relationships. We've been focused on building

partnerships since the beginning, with City Schools, the Baltimore Community Foundation, the Office of Sustainability. You guys have all been very cohesive to work with.



*Has student engagement increased much?*

Yes, the kids are better about trash because we've done a lot of work about what happens to a piece of paper when it goes down the drain and flows into the Gwynns Falls and ends up in the Harbor and then the Bay. So the trash issues are better and everyone in the school has been very conscientious about that. When there's littering, I've heard the kids say to each other "you're really ruining our space, you shouldn't do that", so they're definitely more aware. They also know about fresh food, better eating, locally grown produce, all of our kids go to Great Kids Farm. We want to educate our kids so they push their parents, and we're getting there.

*Anything else important to share?*

I'd like to stress the partnerships with the city and with other organizations. Developing partnerships has been the only way you can do things continually, and that's how you help

kids understand how many pieces of the puzzle you have to put together before you can finish something great. And the little granting programs, \$1,000 may not seem like much, but for us it goes a long way and makes a big difference.

*Why does it make such a big difference?*

Well, I drive here every day and I look at the streets as I pass by. This is such an area of despair and difficulty, and it's reflected in the way the city appears. A school is a place where kids come for safety and care, to share their work, to care for others. By making that the focal point of what's going on in the neighborhood physically and spiritually, it can have a big impact. So, we're trying to look different than trash on the streets, different from stuff that doesn't reflect the kind of place that everyone wants to live in. People who send their children here don't have any different dreams than everyone has. They want their children to grow up healthy, to be good students, to go to college, to be happy and safe, and all these things are reflected in the way you interact with nature. For me, that's the key, that's what the partnerships represent, a lot of people holding us up and keeping us going.



*To learn more about our work with schools, visit [www.baltimoresustainability.org](http://www.baltimoresustainability.org)*