

Greening Our City Schools

School Profile: Thomas Jefferson Elementary/Middle School

Thomas Jefferson Elementary/Middle is a public school located in west Baltimore City, near the city/county line. The school serves 496 Pre-K through 8th graders, of whom 97% are African-American. It is part of the International Baccalaureate Organization, which focuses on critical thinking and inquiry.

The school grounds are large, featuring expansive fields, natural spaces, small gardens, and play areas. Native pollinator plantings and vegetable beds at the school were originally developed with the Irvine Nature Center in 2009, at which time the school first certified as a Maryland Green School. The gardens fell into disuse, but have been revived thanks to staff and community volunteers.



In 2011, Thomas Jefferson got its first Green, Healthy, Smart Challenge (GHSC) grant for a project to replace Styrofoam breakfast trays with biodegradable ones. In 2013 and 2014, the school received more GHSC funding to create and expand a new outdoor classroom with tree stump seating, planting beds, and student art. Thomas Jefferson also became an Energy Hub School in 2014, in partnership with the Baltimore Energy Challenge, embarking on a school-wide education campaign about saving energy. That same year, the school successfully recertified as a Maryland Green School.



Thomas Jefferson’s green activities have steadily expanded, and now include 4-H, raising trout in the classroom, creating compost, keeping chickens, and more! Principal Angela Henry has thrown her full energy behind the greening efforts, with the support of knowledgeable parent volunteers like Ulysses Archie. We sat down with both of them to talk about greening at the school (edited for length):

When you got here, was there much environmental work happening?

Principal Henry: We were a Maryland Green School, we had a gardening club and an environmental club. They got started thanks to a passionate teacher, who left before I got here. A lot of the activities and energy were attached to her. When she departed, it was a challenge for people who didn’t have the same depth of knowledge that she had to keep it going. Over the years since I’ve been here, we

wanted to make these institutional practices, not just attached to a single individual and their vision. Now, people come and go, but this is what the school does. You can see at the front door, we've got our displays and banner, staff wearing 4-H shirts – that's who we are.

What was effective in making that change?

Principal Henry: Connecting it to the curriculum and other resources, so that it isn't just an idea that fits for people who have time, it's something that's connected to learning opportunities, so the children can reflect on how it's a lifestyle. That's what happened with the neighbors who've been involved; it was their lifestyle, something that had been learned over time that they became passionate about. So if we're able to connect it to instruction, the students can also internalize it and see how these activities are connected to learning to live. If we want our children to be global citizens, they have to connect to what starts it all, to our life cycle.



What gets kids and teachers most excited?

Principal Henry: It's the actual doing. When we had the 4-H City Expo hosted here last week, it was so much fun, and the kids on Monday were just gushing about Saturday. We had horseback riding, the kids were walking around with eggs that had just been laid, we planted seedlings, and it was lots of fun.

Mr. Archie: We also have a sensory garden, that and some other gardens were put in by the Irvine Nature Center, so we're maintaining those, but now we're planting new things, we've got our farm, chicken coop, composting. The kids are learning things like, wow, thistle is edible.

Principal Henry: And of course University of Maryland Extension is at the table, this is a 4-H school, they've officially adopted us. It's the first time in recent history that they've actually adopted a school and provided additional resources. It's huge for them and for us. I'm about maintenance and sustainability – keeping what we had, building on it, and putting it in the curriculum, so that the kids have something to do all the time and they now own it, both the property and the process. You can tell the kids, I need you to go out there and pick up the trash or weed and they'll say "ok." I keep gardening gloves under my desk, they know they have to do it. This is the 8th grader's part of the campus, the middle school has been doing the compost, and the elementary students have certain parts of the campus that they're responsible for, they painted the garden beds and the rain barrels.

Any great stories?

Principal Henry: One of the parents had so much fun. When I walked around on Saturday, she was on a horse, saying "we need some honeybees out here now". It was exciting, because she was thinking about

what else we needed, and that wasn't happening before. Some former staff members came back too, to help out.

We're a Trout in the Classroom school, there are only two or three in the city. The children learn how to raise trout from embryos until they can be released. Last year we participated and every last fish died. We tried, we had the tank, but we came back from spring break and the hallway smelled like death, it was so disappointing. So we had to talk about what went wrong, what went right, what are we learning. Sometimes, when something doesn't work, people scrap it, but that's not what this is about. As a school, we came back next year, planned it out and integrated it with the curriculum, and prepared the space differently. We bought new equipment, and the kids created a schedule. It was advertised outside of the classroom daily, you could see the tracking system, which students were the managers and the assistants. They had daily duties and responsibilities, and they prepared for the school breaks. They reflected on what was and wasn't working, had conversations about responsibility and accountability. It was adult facilitated but student managed. They released 75 fish into the stream just down the hill. It was huge, seeing science come alive.

What would make it easier?

Principal Henry: Additional resources. A couple thousand extra dollars certainly helps. We're very frugal and creative. If the funding were available twice a year, that would be better than once. We also need more time, like four-hour blocks to plan, a half an hour here or there is not enough. We need professional development time just for this, not that we're trying to fit into the other days where we already have things we have to do. At least one day per quarter for vertical planning, with outside speakers coming in, just two people to talk to our staff who are authorities on these topics and who could come a few times a year. If someone were able to be compensated additionally, that would help a lot, even part-time.

Anything else important to touch on?

Principal Henry: A lot of branding and messaging has been left to schools, and we don't always have the time to get the word out about everything we're doing. It would be great if we could get the word out to the City Council members. A public education campaign about how many green schools we have, what they're doing, something that could go out systemically. We need more systemic messages, rather than it just being from individual schools. After we coordinate all this, now we also have to tell everyone? We don't always have the energy.



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