

# Greening Our City Schools

## School Profile: George W.F. McMechen High School



George W.F. McMechen is a special education school serving approximately 72 students in 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, up to age 21. It is a separate public day school, which means that it is exclusively for students whose disabilities affect their performance to a degree that placement in a traditional school would not meet their needs. Fully 100% of students are in minority groups, and 86% receive free and reduced price meals. The school is located in northwest Baltimore, and accepts students from around the city.

McMechen's recent environmental activities began with a Green, Healthy, Smart Challenge (GHSC) grant in 2012 for a new flower and vegetable garden in the school's courtyard. Additional grants GHSC in 2013 and 2014 let students continue to expand their gardening activities. In 2014, the school also became an Energy Hub, in partnership with the Baltimore Energy Challenge. Students and teachers engaged in projects to save

money and energy around the school, and to spread the word to parents and community members. That year, McMechen certified as a Maryland Green School for the first time, a huge win for a school that had had no greening programs to speak of just a couple of years before. In 2015, students began composting lunchroom waste, and planted trees around their building.

We spoke with two 15+ year veterans of George W.F. McMechen, teacher Patricia Williams and Principal Tamika Daniels (edited for length):

*Do you have any background in the environmental field?*

Ms. Williams: No, going after the greening grants was the result of needing more vocational training here at the school. At one point, you could get grants for vocational training, but they went away. When the greening grants became available, that changed my direction. All of the education on it that I have received has been through what you all have provided. I went to a training about salad tables, and then the woodshop teacher was able to build them with the information I got from the University of Maryland Extension. They're accessible for students with wheelchairs. I went to a training about meadows, and we're going to be working on installing a meadow this year. Just a lot of reading, teaching myself what vegetables would grow well here and how to grow them.

*Are other staff and volunteers involved?*

Ms. Williams: Everybody! The teachers have just been great. Everyone comes out and participates in whatever needs to be done. We needed to replenish the soil and everyone helped empty out the beds and mix the old soil with new compost, that was our big Earth Day activity. It's a school-wide effort.

*Were the kids interested right away?*

Ms. Williams: They had to get accustomed to coming outside. Some of the kids are more fragile than others, some have allergies. At first some of them were like “but you’re eating off the ground!” I had to get them accustomed to tasting new things, and now it’s not a problem. To see the reaction of the children when you pull up the plants and they see the potatoes at the bottom is wonderful. We make games of things. When the cucumbers are done, we do a scavenger hunt to see who can find the most cucumbers.

*What’s the role of the Green Team students?*

Ms. Williams: The Green Team comes out twice a week, and also when I need them. They have a lot of involvement. When we went to Great Kids Farm, we made these pallet gardens. The adults have to do a lot to assemble things, get it set up, but then the students can put the soil in, plant the seeds, water, so they’re very involved, they take charge. We don’t have to tell them what to do, when they come out they have a routine.

*Any high points?*

Ms. Williams: They enjoy planting seeds the most. Some of the students are autistic and everything with them is very precise. For them to do planting is fascinating to see, they put everything in a perfect row, it’s great because nothing is out of place. We try to use everyone’s abilities rather than focusing on disabilities.

*Any great stories?*

Ms. Williams: We had a student who, when he came here, he didn’t speak at all. He did the paper recycling with me. My name became “Yo Work”. He never called me Ms. Williams or Ms. Pat, only “Yo Work”, and those were actually his first words. He did not speak, he didn’t say a word before that. We had to find something for him. One day we gave him some paper and that was it, he started shredding paper. He used to stand, he would never sit. But when he had paper to shred, he would sit down and stay in his seat, his behavior improved a lot. So, his mother and I looked for a way to give meaning to what he was doing. We found a program called Funding Factory, they take old ink cartridges. So he would shred his paper and put the ink cartridges into boxes with the shredded paper as packaging. He’d put the labels on, and take them to the front to be picked up. We have an account, and for each one we sent, money would go into it. So, he sort of created his own job. And that was around the time he started saying Yo Work. The day that I realized that I was Yo Work, that it was specifically about me, I was standing at Friendly’s on York Road and I heard someone saying “Yo Work, Yo Work”. His parents were standing at the traffic island. I turned and it was him, he was calling to me. After that, his speech got better and better. He says his mother’s name, he can tell her that he wants something to drink or that he needs a pencil. He does classwork where he wasn’t doing work before. He just gained a lot of skills, it was amazing. From paper! But it was bigger than that. He found his niche, and it just happened to be recycling.



*Can you use the garden work to relate to academics?*

Ms. Williams: Absolutely. In science, they learn about living things and photosynthesis, so it ties in there. It connects to English, because they're learning new vocabulary related to gardening and composting. And just learning about the environment, that's science right there. It's also their actual work ability, because these are skills that they can translate to the world of work. We had one group of students who had graduated, they came back when we were planting trees outside of the school and they all have green jobs now at St. Peter's Adult Learning Center. Their coordinator talked about what they do now, they plant trees, do outside cleanup, cutting grass, planting flowers. She only had to give them verbal direction, and everyone already knew what to do. So, that was very rewarding.



*What interested you in the Maryland Green School program?*

Ms. Williams: I hadn't known that we could become a Green School. Renee [a past Green Schools Assistant with the Baltimore Office of Sustainability] came over and she looked at everything we'd been doing and said "you know what, you're probably eligible to become a Green School". She helped me put all of my documentation together, figure out what we could and couldn't use. She got me started, and after a while, everyone was excited. I'd had no idea before that. Once we got started, I couldn't let it go.

*And has it been a positive thing for the school?*

Ms. Williams: Absolutely. Everything just has more meaning. Like when the energy conservation group came in, the kids were really eager to learn how they could conserve energy, reduce the use of water. Even the adults talk to me like I'm monitoring their electricity bills. Everyone has transformed into being much more conscious. Everyone is eating better, everyone is more aware. People don't walk away and leave water running any more, or walk out without turning out the lights.

*Principal Daniels, have you see changes at the school from this work?*

Principal Daniels: Definitely, I've seen that students and staff are more aware of how to keep the environment clean, about recycling, eating fresh vegetables, how to plant. There are several staff members who have taken an interest in planting at home. When you see that a school is a Green School, it's like being a Blue Ribbon School, you know that school has done something extra. So we know we need to take those extra steps to be aware, cognizant, and supportive of the green efforts. I'm really thankful for Ms. Williams, and I love our garden. In the past, our students were just used to fast food. Now our cafeteria manager works with Ms. Williams to make sure that there are more vegetables. So they have a healthier lifestyle, which is very important.

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