

# Raising a 'green generation'

by Susan Leger-Ferraro

These days, 'going green' is at the forefront of conversation in political, entertainment, and corporate circles. Yet to truly impact change, our future generations must carry the torch of transformation. To ensure success, we need to begin the practices with the fertile minds of young children in early education.

Practicing sustainability is not only about recycling and saving the polar bears — concepts incomprehensible to many young children. To truly influence sustainable environmental changes, we must implement practices that enhance global ecology, economy, and equality to substantiate worldwide renewal. 'Going Green' must be a reality for everyone, regardless of culture or socioeconomic wealth. Many



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families have no choice but to use cheaper, more toxic products in their homes. Education plus social reform is the true path towards change.

In early education, the mantra should be 'Plant Early, Grow Strong,' and schools should do their best to lead by example in their day-to-day operations and overall culture. The following is a brief list of practices that early education providers can implement to teach their students about protecting the environmental and human capital we are bestowing them.

## Ecology: The global focus

**Water:** Educate children to keep the water flow to a pencil-thin stream when using the sink; have them sing their ABCs while washing their hands in order to maintain a time limit and to not waste water; and remind them to turn off the faucet when they are finished so that water isn't running continuously between hand-washers.

**Energy:** Children and staff should be reminded to turn off the lights when leaving a room and to leave the lights off in classrooms that are not being used during the day. Natural sunlight

in windowed classrooms is usually sufficient on sunny days. Also, remember to shut down computers, unplug unused appliances, and keep the air conditioning and heat to reasonable levels to conserve energy.

**Waste:** Recycle construction paper scraps, copy paper, old faxes, and junk mail. Reuse the paper as scrap paper for memos or cut it up into small pieces for the classrooms to use for collage or gluing activities.

**Food:** In order to prevent waste, food should be portioned between the classrooms based on daily attendance. Pay attention to serving sizes to prevent food from being thrown away, and teach children about healthy eating.

**Transportation:** When feasible, offer transportation to families. Not only will it provide a beneficial service, but it could reduce overall gas use and emissions.

**Recycling:** Plastic bowls should be used instead of Styrofoam.<sup>®</sup> Teachers should have recycling bins in their classroom in order to recycle plastic, metal, and paper products that are brought into the center in the



children's lunchboxes. Teachers should be encouraged to bring reusable water bottles to work and refill them with water from the cooler in order to lessen the waste that regular water bottles make.

**Materials:** Buy only nontoxic art supplies, while also restricting the use of aerosol sprays and chlorine bleach. If possible, avoid wall-to-wall carpeting as it is permeated with contaminants, and monitor the air for carbon monoxide.

In addition to implementing the easy-to-follow steps mentioned above, you may want to consider hanging inspirational reminders in places that teachers frequent: kitchens, bathrooms (aka 'bathroom reading'), or staff rooms, or including quotes from influential leaders in daily communications with your staff to help the message stick.

Recommended quotes include Martin Luther King's, "It is always the right time to do what is right," or environmentalist Paul Hawkin's, "We have the same impact on our planet in five minutes as our ancestors had in one year."

### **Economy: The national focus**

Renewable resources, both human and financial, can enhance a sustainable future. Following are three effective approaches to consider.

By partnering with federal and state agencies, as well as local non-profit and for-profit organizations, you can promote the importance of early education to the economic growth and ecological sustainability of our nation. The late Senator Ted Kennedy quoted his brother, President John F. Kennedy, when he stated, "The best social service program is a strong economy." A strong economy occurs when people join together to offer sustainability in programs. At Little Sprouts, we have been fortunate to establish a solid partnership with WGBH-TV and its award-winning children's literacy series, "Between the Lions," and are able to offer free resources including children's literature, teacher training, teacher coaching, and online training.

Secure partnerships with local interns from graduate, undergraduate, and high school programs to work as extra

teaching staff. This cost-effective approach benefits the early education students and the interns.

Uncovering grant opportunities from federal, state, and private entities helps expand resources for schools and teachers. Many early education programs do not utilize grant funds that may allow for training and development of staff and purchasing supplies to support high-quality early education. Little Sprouts has secured \$11 million in grant funds to invest in growing its schools. Become active in local and state organizations that share your passion for early education. Join online groups such as "Pre-K Now" ([www.preknow.org/](http://www.preknow.org/)) and listservs like *ExchangeEveryDay* ([www.childcareexchange.com/eed/](http://www.childcareexchange.com/eed/)) that raise your awareness of funding and resource opportunities at a state and national level. Your facility and the children you serve will benefit greatly.

### **Equality: The community focus**

Equality is also paramount to creating a green tomorrow. All families should have access to high-quality programs. In the words of Massachusetts' Governor Deval Patrick, "All means all." By supporting the commonality of humanity and serving a diverse population of low- to high-income families, early education programs can ensure that all children are learning critical life and ecology-sustaining lessons. Numerous state and federal programs offer incentives to early education programs serving at-risk families, including reimbursement of food through the United States Department of Education's Food Program and reduced and free tuition reimbursement for teachers. Schools should take the time to learn of the myriad opportunities for assisting families.

In Massachusetts alone there are 48,000 children under the age of six living in homeless shelters. Why not consider working with state and private agencies to provide early education to children whose families are working to move from homelessness into housing? How about offering the opportunity for access to GED, ESOL, life skills, and job placement to help young adults who are striving to gain skills to earn a living wage? In this way, we can contribute to the sustainability of families by supporting both children and adults.

Look into offering other language classes such as Spanish and American Sign Language to children so that you can help them experience language from a different perspective; perspective fosters acceptance. Exposing teachers to new languages also builds their capacity to embrace and celebrate differences which will ultimately have a positive impact in their classrooms.

Committing to creating awareness in the green movement in our communities is more than just teaching our children to turn off the water when

they brush their teeth. Although this can be a good start, we must consider our environmental goals along with social and economic realities to realize the promise of our Founding Fathers for equality and justice for all.

### **Renewal: Sustaining the plan**

For too long, schools have let corporations and media take the lead on raising our environmental consciousness, when it is the schools that should be taking a prominent role in ensuring that tomorrow's generation understands the consequences of their decisions and the ramifications of their inaction. We must not wait any longer to begin implementing lessons that instill in our students a life-long appreciation for our environment and the appropriate actions for minimizing our impact. Let us begin teaching our children at a young age that they have a responsibility to ensure that tomorrow's world is in better shape than the world we have left for them. Let them learn from our mistakes and develop a brighter future for their children.

