

NORTH NORTHEAST

Eco-School Network forges a sustainable culture

alameda elementary school, amy higgs, center for earth leadership, christy caton, dawson park, dick roy, eco-school network, emanuel hospital, emerson charter school, jaylen schmitt, jeanne roy, michelle strickler0

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Alameda Elementary School students plant seeds while learning ways to protect the earth. Parent-volunteers also organize recycling and alternative transportation projects in the Eco-School Network. (Janet Goetze)

By Janet Goetze

For the Hollywood Star News

Nearly 130 parents are “agents of change” in Portland schools to teach children ways to protect the earth and develop “green” habits to avoid waste and sustain natural resources.

The parents, and some teachers, have received training through the **Eco-School Network**, started in 2008 as a program of the **Center for Earth Leadership**.

Jeanne and Dick Roy, long-time recycling and sustainability advocates, began the center in 2006 to train local people “to assume a leadership role in forging a sustainable culture,” according to the website. Several of the early trainees were parents who organized such projects as vegetable gardens and recycling projects at their children’s schools, Jeanne Roy said. After a couple of years, the center helped link the parents’ efforts into a network that offers assistance in starting projects, learning new skills and exchanging ideas.

The network worked with the **Portland Public Schools** a few years ago to return reusable trays to cafeterias and eliminate Styrofoam trays that may release greenhouse gases in their manufacture and add to landfills after use.

Jaylen Schmitt, whose children have attended **Alameda Elementary School**, helped form a “green team” in 2009 that sought to reduce the use of plastic sandwich bags and other lunch-room waste.

In 2011, Alameda parents joined those at other schools who had created gardens around the school playgrounds. At Alameda, students in kindergarten through fourth grade have been learning about planting seeds, watching some plants climb a trellis and eventually harvesting a variety of vegetables for healthy salads.

A **North Portland** parent, **Amy Higgs**, set up a comprehensive, alternative transportation program five years ago at **Emerson Charter School** to minimize the use of cars around classrooms near the downtown **North Park Blocks**. Alternative transportation also was a way to keep the school enrollment diverse, Higgs said. She had noticed that some parents were withdrawing students from the school because of difficult commuter routes and costs.

She helped form "bike trains," groups of bike riders, accompanied by an adult, who set out from different quadrants of the city. For Higgs, an **Overlook** neighborhood resident, the "train" usually forms at **Dawson Park** near **Emanuel Hospital**, between **North Williams** and **Vancouver** avenues and **Stanton** and **Morris** streets.

Some of Emerson's 150 students are "**Tri-Met Trackers**" who ride buses or **MAX** with a parent shepherding a group. Higgs, who has taken the "agent of change" training with the Center for Earth Leadership, initially applied for a grant to pay for Tri Met tickets through **Safe Routes to Schools**, a national program. When that grant ended, **Friends of Emerson**, the school's parent-teacher organization, began raising funds to supply tickets. Several teachers have joined parents in developing sustainable ideas. One is an Alameda fourth-grade teacher, **Christy Caton**, who is encouraging students to pass up paper towels in favor of washable cloth towels, said Liz Erickson, the co-leader of the school's green team.

"She said it means only an extra load of laundry each week," Erickson said.

A fifth-grade teacher, **Michelle Strickler**, has a 5-gallon bucket in her classroom where students can deposit banana peels and other snack food waste.

"I pick up the bucket on Friday and return it on Monday," Erickson said, explaining that she deposits the material in her curbside recycling bin.

Strickler's students came up with the idea of taking the bucket to the cafeteria where they can recycle lunch-hour food waste, she said. Now a committee is looking into the possibility of expanding a food-waste recycling program throughout the district, Erickson said.

At the end of the school year, green team members in many schools set out bins where students and teachers can deposit pencils, glue sticks, scissors and other supplies for reuse or recycling through non-profit groups.

"We have collected what I see as a dizzying amount of supplies," Erickson said of the Alameda clean-out. "Some things are even unused."

Parents in other schools see similar collections of supplies, she said.

"The goal is to reduce this abundance in the first place," Erickson said. "How do we tell parents they don't have to buy new scissors each year?"

One solution she plans to test is an audit-style program, she said, so parents consulting with teachers will know what is needed for the year and what is already available from the previous school year. This reduce-and-recycle approach also meets an equity goal so that low-income families don't have to buy the same supplies year after year, she said. The parents' efforts have had support from school staff members, she said.

"It's great to be working with teachers who are excited about these efforts," Erickson said.