



ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY

April 21, 2011 - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Students Get CREATIVE at Sustainability Summit

By Janice Leary

CHAPPAQUA, NY: “Our motto is ‘reduce, reuse and recycle,’ ” student Amelia Schwalb explained. “Our goal is to educate kids about the basics of recycling so that they learn good habits and environmental awareness.”

Amelia was one of 60 enthusiastic high school students who participated in the second-annual Student Sustainability Summit, co-sponsored by CELf and Hackley School in Tarrytown, where the event took place in early April. The students represented 19 public and private schools — most from Westchester County, plus one each from Dutchess County and New York City.

In the months leading up to the summit, the students worked at their own schools to lay the groundwork for projects centered on several sustainability issues, including energy, transportation, food and gardens, sustainable design, and climate change. During the five-hour event, student leaders from each school huddled in focus groups to refine their ideas with help from an adult expert on each issue.

The result: creative and diverse ideas that included promoting the use of composting bins at schools, conducting energy surveys of school facilities, checking the tire pressure on classmates’ cars and pitching in to clean parks and rivers in their communities.

“This is a student-led event,” Patti Bressman, CELf’s director of programs and operations, told the students after they gathered in a conference room at Hackley School to make their presentations before the panel of experts. “We hope that you’ll get more and more students, as well as your community, involved.”

Amelia, one of the students representing the Education and Activism/Human Rights focus group, said the members plan to visit local elementary schools to work with teachers and give entertaining presentations geared to youngsters. “Making the three Rs fun will be important.”

As part of their mission to make the project “branded and marketable,” the group will write letters to send to elementary school teachers and local media outlets. The students also will pursue a plan to set up a recycling center at a school to further their educational agenda.

“These kids were great at coming up with a consistent message that can be given to students, teachers and others,” remarked Kevin Stump, SUNY Purchase campus project coordinator for NYPIRG and the expert who provided input during the group’s discussions earlier in the day.

Kevin advised the students to be persistent. “If a teacher says no, go to another teacher. If a school says no, got to another school. Change doesn’t happen because everyone says yes. Change happens because we make everyone say yes.”

Using powers of persuasion will also be key to the efforts of the Food and Gardens/Water group. Among the group's goals is to develop a fundraising program to support the purchase of LifeStraw portable water filters, which are used in developing countries to make water safe to drink.

The group plans to get involved in river clean-up efforts by working with environmental groups, such as Clearwater, said student leaders Caroline Breinin and Bryan Hyam. Moreover, the teens will tour a local farm with Whole Foods Market staff members to learn how the retail chain evaluates food for certification by the company.

"From a business perspective, the group had it right on point," said Tristram Coffin, the expert who participated in the group's discussions. "They knew about the need to create strategic partnerships."

Coffin, who oversees environmental initiatives for 22 Whole Foods Market stores, said he was looking forward to partnering with the students. His advice: work on the local level — for example, to help clean up the many polluted rivers in the U.S. — as well as on global issues.

"Think locally, act locally" might well describe the approach of the Sustainable Design and Zero Impact group. The students' chief project will be to either raise money to buy composting bins or learn how to build the structures themselves.

The group wants to integrate the bins into area school systems, explained student leaders Chloe Arnow and Maddy Spencer, noting that some schools are already engaged in composting efforts.

The bins could be used to grow flowers or vegetables, they said. And school cafeterias, which would begin the cycle by providing food waste to create the composted soil, could serve the vegetables.

The group will also look into raising money for the initiative by selling the soil. Another idea is to expand the "Earth Hour" held at certain schools to a monthly "Earth Period," during which students and staff turn off lights and electronic devices.

"It will be these practical and smart people who are ready to *do* something," remarked the group's adviser, Laura Senkevitch, an environmental analyst at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

The Enacting Change/Energy and Transportation group will pursue another hands-on project: working with Con Ed and similar companies to perform energy surveys at school facilities. The initial focus will be audits of lighting systems, student leaders Taylor Holland and Eliza Cadoux said, adding that the group will create a website that ranks schools based on their electrical energy efficiency.

During Earth Week, the group planned to offer tire pressure checks on teens' cars in school parking lots and distribute pamphlets about transportation efficiency.

Both projects are practical first steps to achieve tangible results, said AnneMarie Hirshberger, climate change law and policy advisor at Pace Law School's Energy and Climate Center. "I was struck by how passionate the students were and how much they knew about the issues to begin with."

The Climate Change/Nature and Biodiversity group was equally enthusiastic about its plans: to educate kids, from the elementary school to high school levels, about habitat destruction and endangered species by making a video featuring several animals and information on how to learn more about the issue and donate money to the cause.

The group will upload the video to Facebook and YouTube and distribute it to science teachers to show in class, student leader Noah Bressman explained.

In addition, the students will talk to elementary school teachers about scheduling assemblies or visiting classrooms to teach youngsters about biodiversity and climate change issues via games, songs and art projects, said co-leader Nadya Klimenko.

Other proposals by the group include sponsoring a nature walk and cleaning a park in Westchester County or New York City.

The students' ideas echoed the advice of Michelle Hersh, PhD, the expert who worked with them. Hersh, an ecologist with the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies in Millbrook, suggested that the group work on both short-term and long-term goals.

Anne Gatschet, co-producer of the summit and Hackley's Upper School sustainability coordinator, said the Hackley Earth Action League (HEAL) was formed several years ago to work on the same kind of sustainability projects discussed at the summit. The idea for the summit grew out of a desire to bring together students from throughout the region to share their ideas and efforts, added Gatschet, a Spanish teacher at the private institution.

"Your passion, enthusiasm and persistence will serve you well as you forge on to become the architects and designers, scientists and engineers, artists and humanitarians who will be so vital to our communities, our governments and our industries," Patti Bressman told the summit participants in closing remarks. "We encourage you to stay engaged and stay connected."