

Nittany Valley Charter School's Environmental Education Program

Nittany Valley Charter School (NVCS) is a K-6 charter school with 48 students located in State College, PA. Prior to receiving their charter in 1998, NVCS had operated as a private school, Nittany Valley Academy serving just 24 students. When Act 22 was passed in 1997, the staff and families of Nittany Valley Academy decided that reorganizing as a charter school would enable the school to share its unique learning opportunities with more families. They formed a founding coalition that spent long hours completing the charter school application and meeting with the State College Area School District to convince them that they should be approved. NVCS opened its doors in September of 1998 and increased from 24 to 48 students.

The Program:

Nittany Valley Charter School has been committed to helping the environment since inception. Environmental Education is a vital component of their mission and goals and is directly tied to the ***Pennsylvania Standards in Environmental and Ecology Education***. NVCS's Environmental Education Program is based on their mission of providing opportunities for students to interact with a variety of instructional materials, as well as to stress the importance of learning from each other, from adults, and from community resources. NVCS believes experiences outside of the traditional classroom setting are an essential component of learning and works at all times to integrate the learning process with a personal understanding of the natural environment.

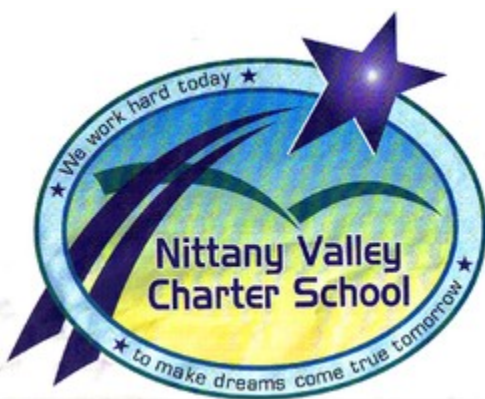
Each week, all grades participate in a weekly 45-minute Environmental Education class. The classroom time can be structured into mini-lessons, activities, and/or observation. The goal is to give the students the information they need to go out into the field and conduct real environmental activities. Stu-



dents in grades four through eight develop projects using experiments or displays to demonstrate current environmental concerns and projects are displayed at an "ecomuseum" that they named ***The Helping Earth Museum***. In the fall and spring, the program is supplemented by a half-day or full-day field trip. The purpose of the field trips is to facilitate an appreciation and foster a sense of stewardship for nature, while simultaneously learning about our natural environment.

In addition, all students participate in regular service to the environment. Last year they transformed their school's peace garden to include raised beds for each class to grow produce to help contribute to their healthy daily

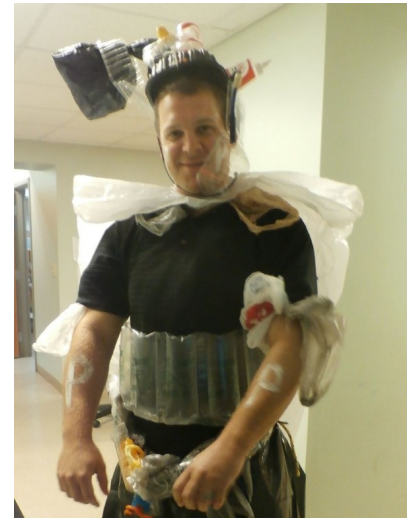
snack. The school and its students have also partnered with Penn State Master Gardeners to incorporate a satellite butterfly garden on their property. This year they are working with a local scout on his Eagle project to build a water containment system to have rain collected for watering their gardens.



Innovation Spotlight:

Nittany Valley Charter School

NVCS takes caring for the environment beyond just enjoying nature. Every day, students compost remains from their lunch. They separate compostable paper goods from those that are really trash. They recycle all that they can. If you were to stop by at lunch, you would see “Plastic Man” working hard to provide ongoing education not only about recycling, reducing and reusing, but refusing plastic. He raises awareness of which plastics are recyclable by giving S.T.A.R. cards to students who rinse and recycle their plastic properly. He also gives cards to students who pack a zero waste lunch!



What's Next

Actively engaging students in learning is the key to Nittany Valley Charter School's success. Moving outside of the classroom, students participate in real-life learning

experiences. These kinds of environmental experiences integrate the learning process with a personal understanding of the natural environment and create life-long environmentally aware citizens. Education plants the seeds for the future.

NVCS looks for ways to enrich students' education beyond what can be provided with the partial funding that it receives from tax dollars. Their next unique environmental project, partially funded by a grant from the Department of Environmental Protection, will utilize the excellent educational resources provided by many entities, including parents, a forester from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and biologist from the Game Commission. Students will be involved in a project to improve the habitat of a local property that was once a Christmas tree farm, but that now has large areas of dying trees. Students will be taught to recognize native trees and to understand a healthy succession of trees and bushes. They will learn firsthand the issues of managing a forest. Using science, technology, and math skills, students will determine what action should be taken to provide the greatest benefit to the environment during class time and eight trips to the farm. Their goal will be to improve the environment and to provide more food and homes for native wildlife, including pollinators. The project's name is "Helping Earth Field Project" and it is just one way that the teachers at NVCS connect students with real problems, people and places.



*NVCS is a Centre County Green Business Partner, and the borough has recently awarded the school with recognition for **Outstanding Achievement.***

*In 2017, Nittany Valley Charter School staff and students were honored with the **2017 Environmental Excellence Award** from the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Pennsylvania Environmental Council for their work .*

Thank you to Kara Martin, CEO and Nittany Valley Charter School for sharing their story. For more information on this program, please contact Kara at kara@nvcs.org or visit www.nvcs.org. If you would like to submit a suggestion for a future Innovation Spotlight , please contact Brandie Karpew at b.karpew@pacharters.org.