Sustainable Schools - May 12, 2022

Outcome: Continually increase the number of schools in the region that reduce the impact of their buildings and grounds on their local watershed, environment and human health through best practices, including student-led protection and restoration projects.

Management Approach 1: Strengthen and coordinate sustainable school state certification and recognition programs consistent with high-quality, recognized criteria such as the U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon School program.

Management Approach 2: Broaden stakeholder engagement beyond environmental literacy constituents to increase awareness, build partnerships, and strengthen support.

Management Approach 3: Identify and disseminate sustainable schools information and resources to school districts and schools.

ABSTRACT: Using the most recent, published data from 2019, the Sustainable Schools outcome has an increase in sustainable schools in the Bay watershed and is "on course." A numerical goal is not associated with this outcome, but instead, aims to continually increase the number of schools each year. The past two years have been very challenging for the educational community due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many schools experienced closings and openings on a repeated pattern, causing pauses and stoppages with sustainability projects and other work that was considered "extra." Alternatively, new sources of funding became available that focused on outdoor learning infrastructure and enhanced indoor air quality improvements. Recent Climate Change, Environmental Justice, and School Infrastructure announcements from the White House will positively impact the work of Sustainable Schools in the Chesapeake Bay in the coming years.

1. Are we, as a partnership, making progress at a rate that is necessary to achieve this outcome? Use a graph or chart to illustrate where feasible (replace example provided with your illustration).

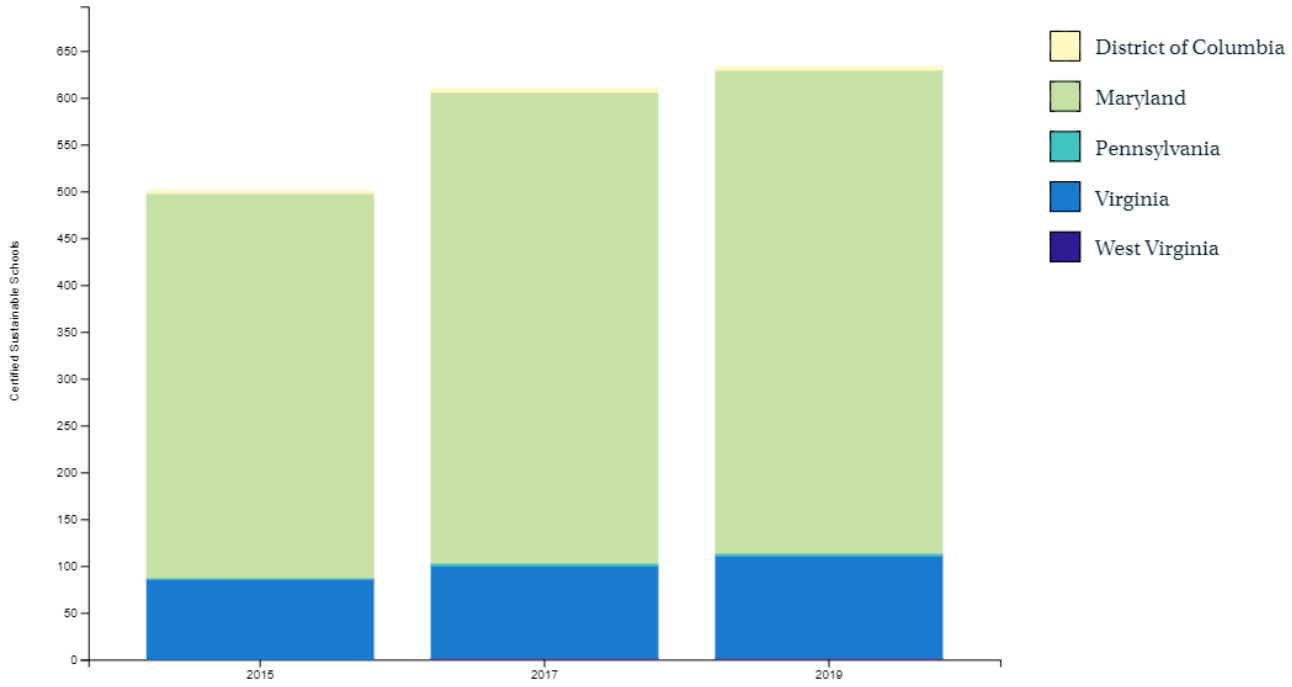
Yes, we are making progress. This outcome has the following goal: continually increase the number of schools in the region that reduce the impact of their buildings and grounds on their local watershed, environment and human health through best practices, including student-led protection and restoration projects. The latest update captures Sustainable School data collected through 2019. The

number of sustainable schools has increased from 501 in 2015, to 610 in 2017, to 634 in 2019. This latest number represents 15% of all public and charter schools in the watershed.

Certified Sustainable Schools in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed (2015-2019)

Certified sustainable public and charter schools have been recognized by the following programs: U.S. Green Ribbon Schools, National Wildlife Federation Eco-Schools USA, Md. Green Schools, Pa. Pathways to Green Schools and Va. Naturally Schools.

VIEW CHART VIEW TABLE



VIEW CHART VIEW TABLE

Year	District of Columbia	Maryland	Pennsylvania	Virginia	West Virginia
2015	4	410	1	86	0
2017	5	503	2	99	1
2019	5	516	2	110	1

2. **Looking back over the last two or more years, describe any scientific (including the impacts of climate change), fiscal, and policy-related developments that impacted your progress or may influence your work over the next two years. Have these resulted in revised needs (*e.g.*, less, more) to achieve the outcome?**

Scientific: Because of COVID and due to the heightened attention of being outdoors and providing "fresh air," outdoor learning became more attractive and achievable. Outdoor classrooms were used for

many lessons, not just science; administrators, teachers, and students demonstrated an increased interest in being outdoors to benefit student health and learning.

Fiscal: In March 2020, through the CARES Act, Congress allotted $13.2B to the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER), which awarded grants to local educational agencies (school districts). In December 2020, another $54.3B was allocated to the ESSER II Fund. In March 2021, under the American Rescue Plan (ARP), an additional $122B was added to the ARP-ESSER Fund to help safely reopen and sustain the safe operation of schools and address the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the Nation's students. Investments in outdoor learning infrastructure (such as picnic tables, tents) and indoor air quality improvements (such as MERV air filters, maintenance to HVAC systems) were made with these new funding sources, but they weren't always tied to environmental learning outcomes. COVID has inspired short-term uses of the outdoor learning environment, but continued messaging is needed to promote long-term health benefits of outdoor learning; and increased training and resources could help to increase curricular ties to advance environmental literacy and to help sustain outdoor learning practices longer term.

Policy: The challenges of COVID have produced a dichotomy in policy for sustainable school programs. Some stronger policies have emerged around environmental programs and sustainable school projects. For example, 1) in Maryland, smaller grants have supported school composting projects that have led to the introduction of new legislation to facilitate composting more systemically; 2) in West Virginia, the WV Department of Education reopened its website to accept "Green Ribbon Schools" applications; 3) new in the 20/21 cycle, Pennsylvania initiated state-level recognitions for "climbing the pillars" to become a sustainable school; and 4) The North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) issued the "Guide to Advocating for Outdoor Classrooms in Coronavirus-Era School Reopening." In contrast, some schools had to focus on COVID, remote learning, and meeting minimum graduation requirements and were not able to focus on "extras," like sustainability projects. Some schools saw a return to single-use lunch trays and more disposable items like face masks, which also led to an increase in trash and more overall waste.

3. Based on the red/yellow/green analysis of the actions described in your logic and action plan, summarize what you have learned over the past two years of implementation.

What Worked:

- **Increased recognition of the benefits of outdoor learning:** "Pandemic learning" has enabled widespread outdoor learning, and health was reimagined as a way to link students to environmental literacy and sustainability efforts. Teachers, schools, and administrators were reached differently due to new resources and opportunities. New resources were created for students and families to be outdoors more.
- **Increased interest in climate change education:** Increased outdoor time led to more conversations about climate change and environmental education.

What Didn't Work:

- **School closures/ reopenings:** The past two years of work have been directly impacted by COVID, resulting in school closures/reopenings and staff turnover. The 2020-2021 Sustainable Schools Action Plan was created with the presumption that we would be operating "normally" within a few months. As we have learned, that was not the case. The educational community has been impacted adversely by the pandemic, and the Action Plan reflects some, but not complete progress.

- **Sustainability projects seen as "extras":** Competing priorities have slowed the implementation of sustainability projects. Student involvement in such projects can be used to address the learning losses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic but are often seen as superfluous.
- **Increase in disposable items:** In an effort to address the health concerns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, previously reusable items (ex. lunch trays and water bottles) were replaced with disposable versions.

4. Based on what you have learned through this process and any new developments or considerations described in response to question #2, how will your work change over the next two years? If we need to accelerate progress towards achieving our outcome, what steps are needed and, in particular, what specific actions or needs are beyond the ability of your group to meet and, therefore, you need the assistance of the Management Board to achieve?

How will our work change? In order to advance progress toward the Sustainable Schools Outcome, our regional professional community needs to:

- **Understand the impact of COVID-19 on the number of sustainable schools** The next collection of Sustainable Schools data is currently underway (Spring 2022), which will update Chesapeake Progress for its 2021 data. Watershed-wide, we anticipate that the number of certified sustainable schools will be either relatively unchanged or slightly decreased. This is not a surprise, and we can attribute it to a few factors all relating to COVID: 1) Virginia Naturally Schools program did not collect data for 2020 and 2021 but has restructured and will be accepting applications in May 2022; 2) under the Maryland Green Schools program, a large amount of schools will drop off because they did not recertify in 2020/2021; and 3) priorities shifted to focus on COVID and many sustainability projects fell behind.
- **Continue to promote outdoor learning as schools reopen:** Looking forward, schools have reopened for the large majority of districts, and are back to planning sustainability projects and engaging in widespread environmental learning. The hope is that outdoor learning will continue regardless of COVID cases, and we will continue to encourage and work to advance all mechanisms to support more outdoor learning. Working through a pandemic and returning to more normalcies, there is anticipation that teacher's professional development will focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) and dealing with the stresses from the past two years. In Maryland, many teachers from the "green schools" have attended training, looked for new resources, and used environmental education as a way to engage with students. SEL highlights the benefit of going outside and connecting with nature.
- **Track and utilize new Federal Funding sources:** The direction of learning and the school environment will be influenced largely, in part, by several key initiatives from the White House. The passing of the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) will enable the replacement of lead service lines in schools and daycares. Executive Orders 13985 (*"Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government"*), 13990 (*"Protecting Public Health and the Environment and Restoring Science To Tackle the Climate Crisis"*), 14008 (*"Tackling the Climate Crisis At Home and Abroad"*), and Memorandum "Modernizing Regulatory Review" all highlight the importance of Environmental Justice and Climate Change principles, which will contribute to stronger and more equitable programs in schools that help to prioritize environmental matters as a key factor for human health.

  An April 2022 announcement from the White House also proposed an Action Plan for Building Better School Infrastructure to upgrade our public schools with modern, clean, energy efficient

facilities and transportation—delivering health and learning benefits to children and school communities, saving school districts money, and creating good union jobs. The action plan activates the entire federal government in leveraging investments from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and American Rescue Plan to advance solutions including energy efficiency retrofits, electric school buses, and resilient design. Under this Action Plan, the Department of Education is proposing a new Office of Infrastructure and Sustainability, as part of the President's FY2023 Budget.

Additionally, The No Child Left Inside Act was introduced in early April 2022. Co-authored by Rep. John Sarbanes (D-MD), The NCLI Act would provide grants for states and school districts to integrate environmental education, including climate change education, into their core academic programs in accordance with statewide environmental literacy plans. It would support critical teacher professional learning and incentivize schools to use school facilities and school grounds for environmental and outdoor learning. The bill would authorize $150 million annually through 2027.

What should the members of the Management Board be aware of? To advance progress toward the Sustainable Schools Outcome we recommend that Management Board Members:

- Continue to look for opportunities to apply for and spend Bipartisan Infrastructure Law $$$ to create healthier schools.
    - For ex., schools with their own water systems can apply for EPA WIIN grants. Where are these schools?
- Assist with White House's "Action Plan for Building Better School Infrastructure" to upgrade our public schools with modern, clean, energy efficient facilities and transportation
    - Under this Action Plan, the Department of Education is proposing a new Office of Infrastructure and Sustainability, as part of the President's FY2023 Budget - help make connections!
- Support of new "No Child Left Inside Act," co-authored by MD Congressman Sarbanes, which could provide $150M annually thru 2027

What specific actions do we need from the Management Board? To advance progress toward the Environmental Literacy Goal, Management Board and high level education leadership assistance is needed for the following:

Overarching Need: Establish environment-focused pathways in both Career Technical Education (CTE) and STEM for each state to produce workforce ready graduates.
Specific actions to address need:
1. Management Board Members: If you choose, nominate staff from the jurisdiction you represent to participate in a conversation around diversifying the environmental workforce through youth programs (high school/first jobs/college), including exploring intentional pathways involving CTE/STEM. Send us names by May 26th. 2. Management Board Members: Establish an Action Team at the Chesapeake Bay Program to focus on Workforce pathways (Education Workgroup, Diversity Workgroup, STAC, others).

Overarching Need: Sustainable funding to implement systemic environmental literacy

programming in each school district.
Specific actions to address need:
Department of Education representatives/Management Board Members: We need to understand the cost required to implement and sustain systemic MWEEs in your state. CBP could assist by providing the sample survey we have prepared and/or hiring a contractor to interview district reps. Would like numbers by the end of the calendar year. 1. By the next Management Board meeting, we are seeking a "yes" or "no" from each state as to whether they will provide a number by the end of the calendar year and what assistance they need.

Overarching Need: Up-to-date data and information from every school district in the watershed on their efforts to create and sustain EL programming.
Specific actions to address need:
1. Department of Education representatives: Send the Environmental Literacy Indicator Tool (ELIT) survey to district superintendents and content supervisors for each of the school districts in your states.

Overarching Need: Maintain high level focus and coordination of state cabinet members and partners on Environmental Literacy Goal.
Specific actions to address need:
It is Maryland's opportunity to host the 2023 Environmental Literacy Summit. PSC is the co-host of the event with Education Workgroup. 1. Seeking agreement from Maryland PSC representative to co-host, and staff level contact(s) to begin planning in Fall.

5. What steps are you taking, or do you recommend, to ensure your actions and work will be equitably distributed and focused in geographic areas and communities that have been underserved in the past?

It is a priority of the Education Workgroup to continue to make the connection with environmental literacy through sustainable school efforts in all schools, but in particular, with an emphasis on schools in underserved communities. This will be achieved by incorporating data associated with health disparities and social determinants of health into our work. We will continue to promote sustainability and "green" projects, create healthier learning environments, and make connections to environmental literacy and green jobs programs, while reducing costs and creating savings. With the aforementioned focus on environmental justice and climate change priorities, Bay-wide sustainable schools efforts will align with diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and accessibility principles.