

## EDUCATING FOR SUSTAINABILITY AT BHS, 2013

*As a large conversation, we should restore to the subject of education the importance that every great philosopher from Plato, through Rousseau, to John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead has assigned to it. Education, as they knew, had to do with the timeless question of how we are to live. And in our time the great question is how we will live in light of the ecological fact that we are bound together in the community of life, one and indivisible.” (David Orr, Ecological Literacy)*

At Besant Hill School sustainability education engages us all in the active cultivation of a community ethic, an ethic that is committed to preserving and enriching our natural, social, and economic resources to meet our present needs, while ensuring that these resources will still be available to nourish and enrich future generations of the school community.

This is not a new concept for our school, our willingness to embrace a culture of sustainability has emerged frequently in our history and we will find it embedded in the original Mission Statement of the school: a document that encourages us to achieve our community objectives while maintaining “an appreciation for nature with respect, compassion and responsibility for all forms of life....”

What *has* changed in the last several years is a nationwide shift in awareness for the importance of environmental awareness in education. We find ourselves, for example, now in alignment with the United Nations and the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) who have strongly encouraged all independent schools to actively utilize the decade between 2004 and 2015 to develop Sustainability Strategic Plans and “Green” practices within our schools. This is an educational movement that resonates with the natural and cultural resources of Besant Hill School: resources that, for generations, have combined to offer our students a perfect opportunity to develop an experiential awareness for environmental principles, while providing them the framework for envisioning the prospect of a sustainable future.

As we move forward with our own strategies to create a sustainable Besant Hill School we are very fortunate to have a network of support with hundreds of other independent and public charter schools. Besant Hill School is a charter member, and California Region Contact for the NAIS supported Green Schools Alliance (GSA), a coalition of independent schools who have pledged to reduce the release of greenhouse gases by 30% over the next 5 years. We are also in direct communication with many Western region schools that are networking together to share resources and experiences. Developing sustainable strategies is a unique experience for each of our schools, but it is also an effort made richer by the spirit of common purpose and collaboration.

Besant Hill School has adopted a Sustainability Strategic Plan designed as a system to combine our diverse sustainable strategies into one integrated plan. Perhaps as important, however, is that our plan is also designed as a means to celebrate our achievements in a measurable way. Our strategic plan identifies our sustainable intentions, along with mechanisms for assessment, in these areas: Energy and Resource Management; Integrating Sustainability into School Curriculum; Enhancing the Natural Environment of the School; Cultivating Community Partnerships; and Enriching Systems of Administrative Support.

Besant Hill School’s Sustainability Strategic Plan has been adopted as a model by the NAIS. We also received the 2011 Green Business of the Year Award from the Ojai Valley Green Coalition, and an Honorable Mention in 2012 from the U.S. Green Building Council for “overall sustainability and design of the campus and buildings.”

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Using our Sustainability Strategic Plan as a rubric for accomplishment, we are proud to be able to highlight these sustainable practices in our school community:

- Student led and supported recycling crews
- Active recycling throughout the community
- Integrated use of a portion of our land for Community Supported Agricultural farming
- Cultivation of Fruit trees and food crops to provide produce for school food services
- Local resource purchasing plan integrated into school food services
- Integration of “Meat-Free Friday” into food service dining plan
- Strategies and integrated curriculum designed to preserve and restore the existing natural resources of Happy Valley
- Integration of “green” architectural design features into all new structures
- Active pursuit of renewable energy resources for school energy needs
- Integration of small scale grid connected and grid free solar energy systems
- Integration of year long freshmen Place-Based Environmental Science course emphasizing Principles of Sustainability
- Charter members and California Region Coordinators for Green Schools Alliance
- Host of the Annual Regional Green Schools Alliance Conference
- Student led crews composting our kitchen and dining waste
- Integration of compostable plastic bags on campus to replace all polyethylene plastic bags
- Strategic integration of a portion of school landscape to include useful and edible plants
- No toxic chemical use for landscaping or farming purposes
- Completion of a baseline energy use survey to measure future energy efficiency strategies
- Installation of high efficiency lighting fixtures and occupancy sensors throughout campus
- Conversion of all campus irrigation to re-activated campus water well
- Installation of water conservation fixtures throughout campus and dorms, including waterless urinals in boys bathrooms
- Student involvement in regional sustainability conferences
- School participation in yearly “Green Cup Challenge,” with GSA members to create significant energy reduction in the month of February
- Student and faculty participation in annual Student Climate and Conservation Congress: collaboration between Green Schools Alliance and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Sustainability Education will come to play an increasingly critical role in our schools primarily because it is an educational curriculum designed to model a creative vision for positive change and hope for future generations of students.