



"Words from the Woods"

By:
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January 2010

OUR PAST, OUR PRESENT, AND OUR FUTURE

Our nation's future relies on a well-educated public to be good stewards of the environment that sustains us, our families, communities, and future generations.

I believe the collective wisdom of our citizens, gained through quality environmental education, will be the most compelling and most successful strategy for stewardship in this generation.

Fortunately, there is an evolution occurring in the charter school moment, and in school reform in general, that has helped to change the way the experts view environmental education. More and more schools now believe that environmental education is the link that can help students make the complex, conceptual connections between economic prosperity, benefits to society, environmental health, and our own ultimate well being.

But a real heightening of our nation's environmental literacy will require momentous educational reforms both inside schools and out. Studies consistently reveal that children suffer from what is referred to as "nature deficit disorder" and the U.S. public, in general, suffers

from a tremendous environmental literacy gap. Sadly, this gap appears to be increasing rather than decreasing.

that 45 million Americans think the ocean is a source of fresh water and 130 million believe that hydropower is our top source of energy.



According to the National Environmental Education Training Foundation, at the very time when the nation needs an environmentally literate citizenry, many schools are being forced to eliminate environmental education programs altogether.

Nationally, there are fewer and fewer students who are able to take part in related classroom instruction and/or outdoor learning. Many elementary schools, in particular, have abandoned environmental education and science instruction altogether.

Fortunately, due to success stories like Green Woods, (95% of our 4th grade students scored proficient/advanced in the Science PSSA!) we are helping to change minds and move the pendulum in the opposite direction.

Green Woods teachers know that the development of environmental literacy can be complex. It can take a myriad of approaches, at various grade levels, for students to learn a single concept.

For example, two-thirds of the public failed even a basic environmental quiz and 88 percent of the public failed a basic energy quiz. This same research found

In the most recent edition of *Educational Leadership*, Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, quotes researcher and educator David Sobel who says “we should consider place-based education as one of the knights in shining armor as students in such programs typically outperform their peers in traditional classrooms. Sponsored by many state departments of education, a 1998 study documented the enhanced school achievement of youth who experience curriculums in which the environment is the principal organizer (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998).”

Green Woods curriculum is modeled after the work of Lieberman and Hoody (www.seer.org). And our mission, vision, and values clearly align with this all-encompassing academic focus. We work tirelessly to build partnerships (too numerous to name) to support our work. These past six years have resulted in our program helping to open three additional environmental charter schools, becoming a true model for school reform. The numerous awards we have received speak for themselves. But, as with any organic entity, as good as we are today, our work cannot and must not remain stagnant. We need to evolve to meet the growing needs of our current and future students.

In environmental education there is something we refer to as the MAD rule: MAD being an acronym for Move, Adapt or Die. When introduced to a potential life-changing stressor within its environment, an organism is faced with one of these three choices. Research will tell you that successful adaptation doesn't happen overnight. It can take generations to occur. For an organism such as a hawk, however, equipped with the physical capacity to easily move to another habitat, its chances for survival are much greater than say, a salamander or frog that can't move very quickly and needs a very specialized habitat to sustain itself.

Moving to a new environment to meet its basic needs, therefore, is much more difficult for some organisms than for others. While most organisms are forced to deal with stressful events in the moment, humans are fortunate to be given the opportunity of foresight and planning allowing us to tap into our experts and prepare for the future.

Over the next several months, Green Woods will be discussing the MAD rule as it applies to our own school environment. We will be working with our financial expert and our partners at SCEE to design an effective approach to address this exciting (and potentially stressful) time in our growth period.

During the next 18 months, you will be hearing talk about how Green Woods will be planning and working toward our goal of a successful re-charter and increased enrollment. With a deadline of December

2011 we find ourselves on an aggressive timeline. Fortunately, we have expert advice to guide us.

Our new financial advisor, Jerry Santilli, of Santilli and Thomson, comes to Green Woods with an MBA and close to 40 years of experience in the field of education and finance. He has successfully served the educational needs of children in his role as a Chief Financial Officer, Charter School Founder, and Charter School Board President. Fourteen charter schools currently put their financial trust in Jerry and his staff of 15 professionals. He is well respected by our authorizers at the Office of Charter Schools and known at the state level as someone with infinite knowledge when it comes to charter school finance. We are pleased that Jerry will be taking the lead in charting our financial future. I know I speak for our entire staff when I say we could not be more pleased to have someone on our team with Jerry's credentials.

Since we are intimately aware of the connection between our budget and our academic program, at our next professional development session our teaching team will be discussing our goals for the coming year and beyond. The starting point for these conversations will, as always, be our students and their needs as we examine the strategies and resources necessary for successful student achievement.

Green Woods has worked hard to earn our local and state-wide reputation for excellence. We feel our students will be well poised to meet the many complex challenges they will face. Our goal for the future is to now enhance our resources and our reach through successful financial planning and sustainable growth allowing more students to participate in our program.

Working together with our financial expert, we will be sure that we are not simply surviving, but that we are effectively strengthening our capacity to thrive and meet the full range of our needs over time. All of our students deserve to learn in a dynamic environment taught by the best teachers possible.

In her book, *Inside Urban Charter Schools*, Dr. Kay Merseth of Harvard University writes, **“Capacity includes the full range of physical and human resources that are needed to translate promises and intentions into actions. Expanding and strengthening capacity is critical, particularly in environments where resources are scarce and work is complex, as is the case with a charter school.”**

We have our work cut out for us. But we also know that our successful planning efforts will ensure our survival. Just as in the past and present, we want our future Green Woods students to not only ace the test, but to leave us having the full range of knowledge and skills to work together and address the many complex issues facing our nation and the world.