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MSN Green

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First graders at [Green Woods Charter School](#) in Northwest Philadelphia hike to a pond near the nature center where their school is housed to see how the pond and the creatures that inhabit it change with the seasons.

At [Four Rivers Public Charter School](#) in Greenfield, Massachusetts, seventh graders study a temporary wetland called a vernal pool and create a 150-page book of research, stories and drawings to share with other schools.

Students at these so-called green charter schools don't just read science textbooks and research environmental issues. They get outside to splash in streams and poke and peer at frogs and trees and learn how nature works and why it matters.

The [Green Charters Schools Network](#), a nonprofit organization formed in November 2007, counts about 120 schools nationwide with "environment-focused educational programs and practices." That's up from estimates as low as 10 to 20 schools just five years ago. Charter schools are independent public schools given flexibility to design their own programs. In return, they're required to show high student achievement.

Green charters rely on nature to teach lessons not only in science, but in social studies and language arts. Many practice what they teach, encouraging healthy lunches, composting and energy efficiency. Some even have buildings built to green standards.

Was the Environment Left Behind?

The growth of green charters comes as public schools nationally are struggling to include environmental education. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) emphasizes math and reading, which critics say comes at the expense of other subjects, like environmental education.

In response, a coalition of 850 national and local groups formed a coalition called [No Child Left Inside](#) to advocate Congress for inclusion of environmental education in the reauthorization of NCLB.

"We believe if you teach environmental education then test scores will go up, we will graduate students who will be more prepared for the 21st century workforce and will be better stewards of the environment, and it would help solve some childhood health issues," says Don Baugh, coordinator of the No Child Left Inside initiative.

In the meantime, green charters offer a public school option. Their programs are designed to foster environmentally-literate, healthy citizens by building lessons around some or all of the major tenants of environmental education: hands-on, project-based, inquiry-driven learning connected to real-world situations and places.

Skills for solving tomorrow's problems

There are about 4,300 charter schools in the U.S. today. The Green Charter Schools Network is vetting all of them for green credentials, and will continue to promote them on their [Web site](#).

Advocates say students with green educations will be better equipped to understand and solve problems like climate change, water shortages and toxins in the environment.

"A child who learns to research, how to think, and how to apply their knowledge, that's what we need to change the world," says Mike Link, executive director of the [Audubon Center of the North Woods](#) near Sandstone, Minnesota. The center has sponsored about 18 green charters in the state.

Here are examples of green charters in cities, suburbs and rural areas across the country teaching students ranging from kindergarten to 12th grade.

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Green Charter Schools



Green Woods Charter School

Green Woods Charter School

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

[Green Woods Charter School](#) in northwestern Philadelphia has become a model for how to teach environmental education in Pennsylvania.

The state mandates environmental education standards, but before Green Woods, no school had curriculum with Pennsylvania's environment and ecology standards as a foundation, says Jean Wallace, academic director at Green Woods.

"This was an innovative model for school reform," Wallace says.

Green Woods opened as an environment-focused charter school in 2002, but it wasn't until 2004, when Wallace came to the school, that a comprehensive environmental curriculum was developed. How Green Woods went about that process is on the school's [w the school's Web site](#) for the benefit of other schools, Wallace says.

"We really wanted to share how we do it, and what we do each day," Wallace says.

Green Woods' curriculum is based on the [EIC model](#), where the environment is used as a tool to integrate teaching and learning across disciplines. EIC encourages schools to use their surroundings and communities -- whether in urban or rural areas -- for students to apply their thinking, learning and problem-solving.

In practice, Green Woods uses environment themes as much as possible for teaching, but, as at other green schools, skills like math don't always connect to nature.

Students "can't figure out stream flow if they don't understand basic math," Wallace says.

Green Woods has 200 students in grades K through 8, and its local environment is the 350-acre Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education.

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