

WAYS TO CELEBRATE EARTH DAY AT YOUR SCHOOL

05.04.2011

Earth Day is just a couple of weeks away, so we thought we'd ask environmental writer and PS 166 parent Emily Fano about what schools can do to celebrate the day. Plant a tree, shred some paper, participate in a waste free lunch contest. Choose one or two of the fun green initiatives below and make a difference at your school.

NYC Schools Can Celebrate Earth Day in Countless Ways

By Emily Alix Fano

April 22, 2011 will mark the 41st anniversary of Earth Day. This year, "in recognition of the power of millions of individual actions," Earth Day 2011 will be organized around "[A Billion Acts of Green®](#)." The campaign is asking individuals, corporations, and governments to measurably reduce carbon emissions and support sustainability. At the time of this writing, some 78 million actions have been pledged around the world.

Schools are the perfect place to initiate Acts of Green; in fact, pledges are being registered on the campaign's "[Green Schools and Education](#)" page. There's no shortage of ideas for fun activities that kids, parents and teachers can do to celebrate Earth Day in New York City schools and beyond. Many of these can become permanent programs. Here are just a few ideas.

Plant Trees: Healthy trees are vitally important for the planet. They regulate climate and supply us with oxygen, and we need a lot more of them. The [Plant for the Planet](#) Foundation, founded four years ago by then 9-year-old Felix Finkbeiner, wants children to lead the tree-planting revolution. The group wants to plant one million trees in every country in the world and urges kids to organize [planting parties](#). The [MillionTreesNYC](#) initiative has many education programs and tree planting opportunities. As part of the initiative, the New York Restoration Project (NYRP) is giving away 3,000 free trees this spring to individuals and community groups across the five boroughs. [Click here](#) to view the current list of giveaway dates and locations, or host your own giveaway! NYRP's RespecTree program helps students learn the need for trees in NYC and even lets them help pick where trees should get planted in their community. Schools can also opt to get seedlings donated by a local nursery, or order them from the [National Arbor Day Foundation](#) and plant them in a suitable spot. If planting trees is not an option, organize a school-wide collection and donate the funds to organizations like [Mokugift](#), [American Forests](#), or [Plant for the Planet](#) who will plant trees for you.

Host an ACE Assembly: The non-profit Alliance for Climate Education (ACE) educates students about the science behind climate change and inspires them to do something about it. ACE presenters come to schools *free of charge* to deliver [entertaining multimedia presentations](#). ACE also invites students to go online and pledge to "[Do One Thing](#)" to help the environment and cool the climate. Call ACE's New York City office to book an assembly at (347) 218-4066.

Participate in a Waste Free Lunch Contest: Kids Konserve (KK), a company selling waste-free lunch items, is sponsoring a “[Reduce Your Lunch Waste](#)” Classroom Challenge during Earth Week, April 18-22. The class that generates the least amount of waste *per student* for the week will get a [Kids Konserve Snak Pak](#). KK has compiled 21 waste-free activities for participating schools, including conducting a classroom waste audit and comparing the energy costs of reusing, recycling and throwing “away.”

Host a Communal Paper Shredding Event: For Earth Day 2010, [PS 166](#) in Manhattan partnered with [EcoPlum](#) and [CodeShred](#) to host a communal paper shredding event. This was greatly appreciated by many families who – around tax season – were able to shred and recycle piles of old documents. The school also joined in and unloaded bins full of old papers that had been clogging storage rooms for years.

Start a School Eco Club: One of the best ways to get kids interested in environmental issues, and inspire them to work together to create positive change, is to start a school environmental club. These clubs can address a wide range of issues from basic recycling and waste reduction, to cleaner indoor air, gardening, and energy conservation. Ideally, they’re led by a motivated teacher who acts as a mentor and can tie the club’s activities into the curriculum. Dedicated parent volunteers are always helpful and a caring principal can be key. “[PS 276](#) has 1st, 2nd and 6th grade Environmental Clubs for now, and all the grades will eventually be offered the chance to start their own,” says Terry Ruyter the school’s principal. Ruyter says that environmental club members serve as recycling monitors at lunch, are in charge of battery and bottle cap recycling, and harvest compost from worm bins in five or six classrooms. The first and second grade environmental clubs created a list of **100 Ways to Love the Earth** which is posted in the school’s hallway and highlighted on the website. This list includes things like “unplug the TV” and “have a compost bin in the kitchen.” The art clubs and environmental clubs at PS 276 are also collaborating to create an interactive mural about how cities can be green. The book [Green School 101](#) offers valuable tips about how to start a school environmental club.

Set Up Recycling Programs and Earn Cash: The children at [PS 199](#) are super recyclers. Aside from paper and cans, they have collection bins for [bottle caps](#), [textiles](#), [sneakers](#), [used ink cartridges](#), and [eye glasses for the blind](#). Recycling pays too, literally: schools can redeem cans, empty ink cartridges, cell phones, and [juice pouches and snack wrappers](#) for cash!

Plan an Earth Day/Week Fair: PS 333, the Manhattan School for Children, is planning a week long Earth Fair, April 9 – 15, that will include a school-wide fitness event, classroom air quality and energy labs, a green cleaning information table, a week-long waste reduction competition for grades K – 3, a Harvest Day featuring produce grown in the school’s greenhouse, screenings of educational films like ‘[What’s On Your Plate](#)’ and ‘[The Story of Stuff](#),’ and daily class worksheets relevant to each day’s focus. The school has also started its own Community Supported Agriculture program or CSA – offering high quality, fresh produce grown locally by regional farmers to its community from June 1st through October 26th.

Schools can choose to be ambitious or pick one activity. For example, during Earth Month, 6th graders at PS 276 will be reading an Earth fact every day in April over the loudspeaker. A campaign to [raise awareness about plastic water bottle waste](#) is also a great idea. School stores can be set up to sell things like stainless steel water bottles. Ask your community to purchase/bring in reusable bottles for a week or month and calculate the plastic you saved.

Help Migratory Birds: Spring is migratory bird season. Songbirds headed to boreal forests in Canada and shorebirds headed to Alaska will stop in our urban parks to rest and feed. New York's tall buildings and reflective glass pose a collision threat to over 100 species of migratory birds. The New York City Audubon Society (NYCA) has launched [Project Safe Flight](#) to protect them. NYCA's John Rowden says there are many ways school children can help migratory birds. NYCA is working with 1st graders at PS 276 to reduce bird collisions through the creation of artwork that will be hung in the school's and nearby office building's windows. Rowden says that schools can turn off their lights at night and encourage families and neighbors to do the same. Classes can take walks in neighborhood parks to do some bird-watching. Children can make birdfeeders and birdhouses to hang on trees around their schools. Donations can be collected for the [Wild Bird Fund](#) which helps injured migratory and other birds.

Start a Composting Program: In the U.S. [we shockingly waste/throw away 40% of our food supply](#). As Jonathan Bloom points out in his book *American Wasteland*, when we throw away food, we're not only wasting resources like water and oil that are used to produce that food, but rotting food in landfills produces methane – a greenhouse gas that's 20 times more potent than CO2 at trapping heat. Composting can teach children that food isn't trash.

Matt Sheehan, a former 4th grade teacher at PS 146, the Brooklyn New School (BNS), is now BNS's volunteer Sustainability Coordinator. With \$5,000 from a Golden Apple Award and a corporate grant in 2008, Sheehan organized a school-wide composting program. The system – which is managed during lunchtime – took two years to develop, and has become part of the school's culture. "There are small plastic worm bins in all kindergarten and 1st grade classrooms with eight teachers maintaining them. There are also two big worm bins outside with 30 pounds of worms in them each, and four composting tumblers," says Sheehan. Food scraps are collected in the lunchroom. Kids separate the food scraps into 5-gallon plastic buckets (fruits and veggies are separated from liquids and meat). The 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade classes work in the lunchroom on 2-week shifts to supervise the program. Middle schoolers come down on Wednesdays and Fridays to chop up the food and put it in the bins. He says that because of the composting program and increasing consciousness among the students, he has seen a shift to less food being thrown out/wasted overall! Until Matt Sheehan can be cloned, the [NYC Compost Project](#) has designed a range of workshops on indoor and outdoor composting specifically to service New York City schools.