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A Green Machine

Local Schools Have Made the Environment a Priority

A Green Machine Emerges

The Acton-Boxborough School District has cut waste, slashed energy consumption and racked up a slew of awards for its various environmental initiatives.



Students at Acton-Boxborough recently held a trash party audit, where they calculated how much cafeteria waste was actually trash. After students set up a new sorting method during lunch periods, the school was able to reduce the amount of trash it generates daily from 40 full trash bags to six. Photo courtesy of ABRHS

by Eric Geng
ABRHS Class of 2014

Acton-Boxborough Regional High School has emerged as a green machine over the past couple of years. Since 2009, the school has seen a significant growth in its green energy programs. Students and faculty members have taken the initiative to lead clubs, raise awareness and plan projects, culminating in substantial cost savings, energy reduction and even awards – including recently being one of the first school districts in the nation to receive a Green Ribbon Award from the U.S. Department of Education (see box).

At the beginning of the 2011-2012 school year, the high school hosted a “trash sorting” party, as an evaluation of the cafeteria’s waste. The results revealed that 80 percent of this waste was not actually “trash,” but rather recyclables and compostables. This issue led to the creation of the Cafe Project, an efficient and effective method of sorting waste. Two sorting stations have been organized at each lunch period, each

with three different bins for trash, recycling and compost. The stations are managed and staffed by students, who help others to sort their lunch waste correctly, which has improved trash efficiency and raised awareness about environmental issues and solutions.

Students actively recruit new volunteers and serve as role models for environmental activism. The willingness and commitment to serve among stu-

dents has driven the success of the Cafe Project. Instead of the 40 bags of trash generated daily under the old system, the cafeteria now produces only six bags of trash with all other material diverted to composting or recycling.

The AB Recycling Club complements the Cafe Project. Every Thursday, club advisor Steve Singer and a team of students visit each classroom to gather recycling. Together, Cafe Project and the Recycling Club have made a tremendous impact on ABRHS’s sustainability.

Acton-Boxborough has also been a leader in energy conservation, reducing electricity usage by 15 percent over two years with an annual cost savings of \$80,000 — that’s 400,000 fewer pounds of CO₂ emitted each year, the equivalent of 20,000 gallons of gasoline. These results were achieved without any capital investment. Students on the Power Down team, with coaching from Energy Advisor Kate Crosby, have led the effort. Every month, students conduct

energy conservation audits, evaluating classroom energy use and leaving notes thanking faculty for “powering down.” Currently, Power Down has started the Power Down Picnic Project, which is a friendly competition between departments to encourage energy conservation and awareness. Students provide monthly feedback for each department office on energy conservation and waste management and hold a picnic for the department that performs the best. This has been a very easy and fun method of promoting sustainability and raising awareness. Faculty and staff members have been enthusiastic and open to new ideas throughout this process, and the administration has been very supportive. The level of success can be attributed to the teamwork and excellent attitude of students, staff and faculty members.

Envirothon, a student group led by AB science teacher Fred Hohn, is also very committed to greening our school. Last spring, the team organized an environmental service project, planting a large rain garden on campus in collaboration with the Acton Garden Club. Envirothon also participates in an annual academic competition with an environmental theme.

The school district serves as a reminder of how subtle changes in our lifestyles, such as just turning electronics off, can have significant impact in our community. The substantial improvements in sustainability and conservation can be attributed to the commitment, dedication and leadership of students, staff and faculty members. AB has truly become a role model for environmental progress around the country and has high hopes for future sustainability.



Assistant U.S. Secretary of Education Michael Yudin visits with Environmental Science students at ABRHS. Yudin's visit was to honor the district's achievement in receiving the Green Ribbon Award. Photo courtesy of ABRHS

Tops

In addition to the prestigious Green Ribbon award, the school district has won a host of other honors for its environmental initiatives.

Last year, AB became the fourth school in the nation to receive a Green Flag Award from the National Wildlife Federation; the National Energy Education and Development Project named AB the National “Rookie of the Year” in energy conservation; the school received the Secretary's Award for Excellence in Energy & Environmental Education from the state Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs, and AB received the Silver Recycling Reward from MassRecycle.

GREEN RIBBON THE NATION'S FIRST

This past Earth Day, the Acton-Boxborough School District became one of the first school districts in the nation honored with a Green Ribbon Award from the U.S. Department of Education. The award recognizes schools and districts for their exemplary efforts to reduce environmental impact and utility costs, promote better health, and ensure effective environmental education. AB is one of only 14 districts in the nation to receive the award this year; the first time districts were given the award.

The “honorees are modeling a comprehensive approach to being green,” said U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. “They are demonstrating ways schools can simultaneously cut costs; improve health, performance and equity; and provide an education geared toward the jobs of the future. In fact, the selected districts are saving millions of dollars ...”



An emphasis on conserving energy has resulted in an \$80,000 reduction in costs per year. Photo courtesy of ABRHS