

## **GREATER EGLESTON COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL**

For a number of years, students at the Greater Egleston Community High School in Boston were provided with similar opportunities to affect public policy on environmental and social issues in their own community. Although the school's focus has shifted during the past six or seven years, for more than a decade, teachers there sought to prepare its primarily Black and Latino students to become community leaders committed to enhancing the health and livability of Roxbury, one of Boston's less affluent neighborhoods.

Starting with a Department of Labor grant in the early 1990s by a group of parents concerned about the attractions of street and gang life for their children, the school quickly became one of Boston's pilot schools, the equivalent of within-district charter schools given more flexibility with hiring, and curricular and budgetary matters than their more conventional counterparts.

When a science teacher named Elaine Senechal came to the school in the mid-1990s, she investigated ways to link her own program to its social concerns. After attending meetings of a number of neighborhood nonprofit environmental organizations, she created a course on environmental justice, making use of the offer of two women from Alternatives for Community and the Environment to come in on Fridays to teach her students how to be community organizers.

At this time, the local environmental nonprofits were exploring ways to deal with rising asthma rates in Roxbury, a health problem they associated with the high levels of diesel traffic in this section of Boston. With this in mind, Senechal had her students count the number of buses and trucks that passed their school on Washington Street in an hour. They tallied more than 100 vehicles.

Next they began to work with adults in the community to raise funds to purchase air monitoring equipment for local public health organizations so that it would be possible to determine actual pollution levels; they also composed, distributed, and collected a survey about community knowledge about asthma and its relation to vehicle exhaust. When the air quality monitoring equipment was in operation, students developed a signaling system at the school to inform the public of changes in air quality from day to day.

Around the same time, the environmental nonprofits discovered a local statute that was supposed to prevent vehicles from idling at a single location for more than five minutes. The statute, however, was unenforced. This led to a six-year anti-idling campaign aimed at getting the City of Boston to administer its own laws. Given the fact that the bus lot for the Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority (MBTA) is located in Roxbury, just a half-dozen blocks from the Greater Egleston Community High School, a successful outcome of this campaign promised significant health benefits for the neighborhood.

Each morning, over two hundred buses would often idle for more than a half hour, leaving in their wake a toxic mix of carbon monoxide, particulates, and other air contaminants. During these years, students organized anti-idling demonstrations, wrote press releases, conducted interviews with the media, and presented testimony before the Boston City Council.

In 2004, a court case brought by the U.S. Department of Justice led to a \$1.4 million settlement that required the MBTA to reduce idling times of buses to five minutes and to run cleaner trains (Environmental Compliance News 2004). Although students at the Greater Egleston High School are no longer involved in these efforts, organizers at Alternatives for Community and Environment continue working with youth in the Boston

area to address air quality and other environmental justice issues.

Most recently, middle and high school students have been working to pressure construction companies that use heavy equipment to retrofit their vehicles with pollution-reducing devices. In the summer of 2011, students from the Mission Hill School and other programs developed presentations and skits they shared with representatives from the Brigham and Women's Hospital and Northeastern University aimed at persuading these institutions to work only with construction firms with low-polluting vehicles. Brigham and Women's Hospital agreed to follow through on their suggestions (Towey 2011); officials at Northeastern University had not yet committed themselves to this option.

The impact of engaging in significant local inquiry and action projects like these can be transformative. A young woman who was part of Senechal's environmental course described the way her experiences had altered her

sense of her own involvement in this kind of work as follows; "I am proud of my accomplishments in environmental justice this trimester. Most importantly, I have been able to gain confidence to speak in front of larger groups of people. Before a presentation to the City Council I was very nervous. But after watching them and my classmates somewhat debate I realized they are regular people just like my family, my teachers, and my friends, and I should not be nervous when it comes to speaking my mind". (Senechal 2008, 100)

The opportunity to participate in organizing efforts that result in changes like these can do much to encourage young people to believe that their efforts can result in positive benefits for their families, neighbors, and communities. It does not seem farfetched to believe that grounded in such experiences, they could well take their place among those activists who are working to preserve and restore the health of local natural and social systems described by [Paul] Hawken and seen by Wallerstein as essential to the creation of the alternatives needed to replace capitalism.

Although the Greater Egleston Community High School no longer engages students in their community in the way it once did, classes taught there by Elaine Senechal modeled an especially successful form of sustainability education. What she and her students accomplished addressed many of the EfS benchmarks.

**Big Ideas.** Through their work over a half dozen years, students engaged with many of the big ideas associated with the benchmarks. Their effort to reduce pollution from diesel-fueled vehicles was based on a recognition that **all systems have limits**. The airshed in Boston and their neighborhood, in particular, could absorb only so much exhaust before having a negative impact on people's health. They began to participate in a political change process because they recognized that **changes in the Earth's surface environment can negatively impact the health and well-being of other people**. Rather than seeing themselves as powerless to change these circumstances, they joined with others to successfully modify the systems that allowed polluting practices to persist. In doing so they benefitted everyone in the Boston metropolitan region.

**Higher Order Thinking.** As they worked to challenge existing policies and practices, they needed to **think creatively** about how to present issues and gain the attention of policymakers. Their work with the organizers and youth developers from Alternatives for Community and Environment led them to imagine a system of colored flags that could be used to inform neighborhood residents about air quality on a daily basis. That creativity also played into their organizing anti-idling demonstrations and the unofficial “tickets” they placed on vehicles that had idled too long in place. As they **prepared testimony** to deliver to the Boston City Council, they needed to **engage in critical thinking to make sure their arguments would be persuasive and well supported**. Organizing the anti-idling campaign required them to **learn how to write press releases and conduct interviews** with print, radio, and television reporters. Students in the environmental justice class gained both the confidence and skills needed to become lifelong activists in whatever communities they joined as adults.

**Applied Knowledge.** With regard to content knowledge, they learned about the sources of air pollution, the consequences of that pollution, and **strategies for monitoring, collecting, and presenting data about it**. Working with other local agencies and activists, **they developed a deeper sense of connection to their own community and the importance of taking steps to protect and enhance it**. All of their efforts were aimed at creating a **healthy commons**, recognizing that **airsheds are among our most precious but least appreciated commons**. Interacting with adults knowledgeable about the ins and outs of political decision making, they **gained an understanding of the way that systems operate and either impede or support change**. Following the lead of these adults, including their teacher, they became involved citizens whose efforts were valued by their families and neighbors. **When Boston University announced plans to build a Biolab 4 (among the most dangerous) in Roxbury, the community came to the students in the environmental justice class to help lobby against it.**

**Applications & Actions.** Applying learning and engaging in action were at the heart of students’ work at their school. They learned from professionals **how to engage in dialogue, plan scenarios, and teach their neighbors as well as policymakers about the consequences of current policies and practices regarding the regulation and use of diesel-burning vehicles**. They helped contribute to the regeneration of fundamental environmental systems upon which their community depended and **confronted decision-makers with need to develop policies that optimize health and adaptability**. They became community leaders able to envision, strategize, and plan, **leading by example and demonstrating the importance of local governance**. **In this process, they left Roxbury a better place than they found it and served their community in ways that had long-term benefits for themselves and others.**

**Dispositions.** Learning in this way required them to become **courageous, curious, efficacious, motivated, persevering, and resilient**. As they interacted with one another and community members they needed to be **caring, collaborative, ethical, place/community conscious, responsible, and trustworthy**.

**Community Connections.** All of the work of this class was aimed at **servicing the community by bringing community members into the school and students into the community and its agencies and governing bodies.**

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