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Going Green: A Parent-Teacher Collaboration

By **Laura Sametz**, 11/12s parent, and **Claire Mansfield**, 6/7s head teacher

Claire: Laura, at Bank Street we talk about collaboration a lot but not only do we talk the talk, we walk the walk. Our recent collaboration around sustainability, how it came about and how it evolved, is a wonderful example and was an important part of our curriculum. To make sure that we can do it again, let's review our process.

Laura: Claire, I would love to do it again! But, we need to go back to the beginning.

Claire: First, there was a school-wide push to do more recycling. You and members of the Parents Association's Green Action Committee helped implement that. More and different recycling bins were introduced to the whole school and to each classroom.

Laura: I was a new parent to Bank Street moving from a school where I had created a Cafeteria Composting Pilot with several other parents. The NYC Sanitation Department rolled our compost pilot program to other schools, starting on the Upper West Side. They eventually incorporated hundreds of schools in Manhattan and Brooklyn. When my son entered Bank Street, the school had quite a successful recycling program but had yet to venture into composting. I reached out to the Department of Sanitation to see if we could be added to the compost pick up. With the support of the administration and teachers, we began a program in the Cafeteria, 6/7 classrooms, and in the Upper School classrooms.

Claire: You came to my classroom with posters that explained what needed to go into each bin.

Laura: And, this is how our collaboration began. The children in your classroom asked wonderful questions. I showed them the source separation posters and we discussed and practiced what went into which bin. I brought in different items for them to practice with. Your children had so many questions about where waste goes. Landfills were a particular curiosity to the children, and you had me come back and visit a number of times (which I loved). The children asked the questions that I only wish had been asked decades ago. Perhaps our planet wouldn't be covered in landfills.

Claire: Children really care about the environment. I especially appreciated the way you told us that none of us are perfect and it's alright if we don't always remember

what goes where for recycling. You helped us feel not too guilty about what we don't do and good about what we manage to do, while inspiring us to do better.

Laura: So many people don't know where to begin or think they will not make an impact so why even try? Even the smallest effort counts and inspires others. I think the shoe drive (a partnership with Wearable Collections) reinforced the idea of re-use and recycle and also inspired the community. The shoes that were still wearable were given away and the ones too worn were given to a company that makes playground surfaces.

Claire: The 6/7s students participate in several community service projects each year, including collections for books, food, and toiletry items. The students take responsibility for decorating boxes and creating signs to go around the school for collections and the 6/7s parents help the students collect and pack the collections.

Laura: Do you remember how excited the students were to receive a check for the shoes they collected?

Claire: We didn't know that we would get 10 cents for each pair of shoes! That check led to several math lessons. We couldn't remember how many shoes we had collected, so we worked out how many sets of 10 cents were in the total amount to get to the answer. Then the students thought long and hard about what we should do with the money. They ultimately decided to buy food items for the next community service project, which meant making decisions about what food to buy and how much could be bought with the money. A group of students went to Westside Supermarket to buy the food to donate.

Laura: What a great cycle.

Claire: Laura, you've already noted how the children had a lot of questions about where waste goes, which included questions about food waste specifically. José Guzman, our science specialist, and Jenny Ingber, who heads up the Kerlin Institute, helped us build on this curiosity. They suggested a study of red wiggler worms, which are used to compost food. Together with my assistant teacher, Janel Frazier, we planned a series of lessons, beginning with building a habitat for the worms that José and Jenny brought to our classroom. Our art teacher, Maria Richa, joined us to help teach the children to tear newspaper into strips for the worm composting box.

One of our first lessons had the students working in pairs, using their senses to explore the red wiggler worms. Over time, the students' observations became more and more detailed. Their first observations included: "My worm was hard to pick up because it

was slimy.” “I smelled it and it didn’t smell like anything.” “My worm jumped, it did a flip.” “The worm goes in and out to move.” “Looking through the magnifying glass, the worms looked bigger.” Later observations included: “They have a head, but no eyes.” “They twitch.” “They don’t have legs.” “It looks like a bandage around them.” “They curl up into a ball.” “They have rings of a tannish color.”

After several lessons learning about red wiggler worms, a culminating activity was making a class book about what had been learned. Each student made a page and we sorted the pages into chapters. Chapter 1, called the Observation Group, included: “When they move, they stretch and get thin and then they get fat.” “They get tangled a lot because they don’t know where to go.” In Chapter 2, called How Do Worms Live, students wrote: “They need moist earth.” “They go underground and come out when it’s warm and wet.” “To live they need a shady place.” Chapter 3, called, Food and Water, included “They help us recycle food.” “They drink water from the roots.” “Red wiggler worms like to eat fruits and vegetables.” “Red wiggler worms eat twice their body weight every day.” Chapter 4 was called, Things that Red Wiggler worms Do Have and Don’t Have: “Red wiggler worms have body parts called segments and clitellum.”



One of the colorful cafeteria posters

“Red wiggler worms have bristles which are like legs.” “All worms are blind and have no eyes and no ears.” “Red wiggler worms poop out stuff that looks like dirt.”

Laura: That classroom book really captured their learning about the worms. What did you do with the compost they made?

Claire: The 6/7s students helped the 4/5s students use it with planting on the school deck.

Laura: The cycle of learning continues. Next you went to the composting center on Governor’s Island. How did that come about?

Claire: Another parent, Mary Pat Draddy, told me about it. The name of the center is Earth Matters Compost Learning Center. It was a particularly special class trip because Mary Pat had her sister-in-law, who is associated with the center, come with us. We went by bus and ferry to Governor’s Island. We had about two hours there, learning to be compost operators. At the center, we learned how to make chicken compost, culminating in using the chicken compost for planting. We were also allowed to collect eggs from the chickens to take back to school which, after lots of discussion, were used to make French toast for a classroom snack.

Claire: You mentioned that the Family Center, Lower and Upper Schools here at Bank Street also participate in this work in sustainability. For example, in the first week of the school year, students in my class who had just come from the Lower School chose to make posters for the classroom with the message, “Take Care of Our Earth,” which served as reminders to us all. Our class compost bin is continually used and at lunch time it’s the students who remember we need to pick up the big food compost bin. Next year, I will try and connect with our older buddy class to see if we can work together on a sustainability project. Laura, what could you see as next steps?

Laura: Well, first, thanks to all who have done and are doing so much to make Bank Street a greener place. For example, have you noticed that the soap in the classrooms has been changed to a greener make? The amazing maintenance department is also experimenting with other disinfecting green products throughout the school.

One of the next steps is to take what we have done building-wide. For example, there needs to be an assessment done of what classrooms and offices in the Graduate School have recycling bins. I think there has been progress but a lot of paper and plastics are not making it into recycling bins yet. Also, we need to find a way to help graduate students use recycling and composting bins when they come to classes in the afternoon and evening. The kids making signs as reminders might be a great beginning.

For the School for Children, a good next step would be to focus more on the conservation and recycling of paper. The school has done an excellent job with far more digital communication, but schools use a lot of paper and the paper needs to get into the designated bins. Perhaps there could be a project for the students where they collect data and graph it and share with the maintenance department.

Claire: We will get José, our math-science coordinator, to spearhead that.

Laura: Also, there is a company called Terracycle that recycles used school supplies, such as pens and tape dispensers and more. Would you like your class to pilot a project next year?

Claire: Yes!

Laura: Last year, Maria, our art teacher, made a mobile out of keys as the backdrop for Winterfest to encourage re-use. I was wondering if this year a class could do a sculpture, using recycled and/or reusable objects found around school, and make a sign saying, “Did you recycle today?”

Also, maybe it’s time to create another play. The 9/10s performed a play in Middle School morning meeting when we began the composting program to show their peers what to do. Habitual patterns of throwing away garbage are always hard to change. Nothing better than children teaching grown-ups! I learn every day from my son.

Claire: I agree, nothing better than children teaching grown-ups! It’s an authentic way of showing what they have learned. Also, here at Bank Street, we place a lot of value on teaching children how to collaborate on projects. I love that we are modeling how to do that.

Laura: Going Green is also a good example of our school’s commitment to social justice, as well as the collaboration on projects you spoke of. In my understanding of sustainability for our planet, it is imperative for us to think of each other and our environment, to continue to work together as a community to make our schools as green and un wasteful an environment as we can. It is crucial for the children to continue to learn about their impact on their community. This is one of the seeds of social justice, is it not? And you know me, if we can inspire persuasive essays from the kids aimed at waking up heads of corporations, advocating for someone else, in this case the next generation, all the better. Preserving our environment and sustaining the planet are economically wise. And I don’t believe you can separate social justice from economics. Maybe that is too large a concept for the younger children yet to grasp, but we certainly can plant the seeds of environmental stewardship.