
For a Healthy Home, We Must Change Our Education Priorities

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ABSTRACT In this article, the author discusses the need for a complete refocusing of education throughout the world, prioritizing environmental education in all K–12 schools. He provides a summary of his Green Career Program and the many extensions it encompassed. The program endorses the importance of creating student voice, critical thinking and the education of a New Green Workforce which prioritizes caring for the health of the planet. The author believes that the Green New Deal cannot function if educational priorities are not rethought (environmental education throughout the curriculum), and presents his thoughts on the state of the planet and assisting youth to shape their future.

In this critical time in world history, in Earth history and in the history of this country (the USA), we must step forward as educators and be *bold*. We must truthfully and accurately teach knowledge which will enhance and contribute to healing and regaining the health of the planet. We must reform our priorities and, besides teaching the basics – mathematics, language arts, histories (whose?) and sciences – we must present the honest and unedited truth of the causes which brought us to this health crisis and future, predicted pandemics if we do not change our hearts and minds toward the treatment of our home. Environmental and earth science, sustainable practices, social and economic equity, nutrition and environmental health must become an essential and mandatory curriculum throughout our K–12 (kindergarten through Grade 12) classrooms. A grade-appropriate curriculum which delivers in honest terms these crucial classes must be developed, written and integrated into our daily lessons if we are ever to begin the healing. We, as educators, must stand united and demand that our Department of Education fully fund this creation of a new and exciting curriculum, and rehire laid-off and retired educators to research, develop and write this new curriculum, much of which is already available but *not* offered in public schools.

We must teach our children, through example and story, the attributes of gratitude, reciprocity, compassion, empathy and, most of all, love for all life and the Earth. If we do not step up and deliver, I see little hope that we will not keep repeating our downward spiral to extinction.

In a country overwhelmed by consumerism and the love of ‘things’, we cannot hope for the Green New Deal (Friedman, 2019) to succeed unless we completely and thoroughly reform our education system.[1] Unless we transform our K–12 curriculum and prioritize each class to specialize in the study of Earth and our responsibility as a species to ‘do no harm’ to our home, there will be little progress in reversing the destruction of the planet, even if the Green New Deal is adopted as a blueprint for change. Creating a green workforce does not educate against rampant consumerism, nor illuminate social equity or environmental justice. In developed, consumer-driven societies, understanding why we need green jobs, green energy, healthy soils, water, air, forests and oceans, and non-poisoned, healthy food is essential. Social equity should spearhead the movement to reform education in sustainable practices, organic agriculture, green energy and building, and protecting and replanting a trillion trees across the globe. Technology should be a tool to enhance recovery by implementing the precautionary principle, creating useful, long-lasting products which ‘do no harm’ and are thoroughly tested before being allowed into an already fragile environment. Creating millions of green jobs, which are morally, ethically and sustainable to *all* life, must be the goal.

All students must understand and gain knowledge of environmental justice as it applies to natural-resource extraction, and child and slave labor practices inflicted on other nations’ populations to profit and enhance our economic standing in the world. All students must be immersed in the ‘cradle to cradle’ concept, knowing where the products they covet come from, how materials are gained, and the end of that product in landfills or, worse yet, our oceans and landmass. Included in this knowledge must be school gardens and, where applicable, school farms operated by students, for students and staff. A thorough instruction in food production, farm workers’ rights and protection, and healthy food systems must be mandatory throughout our high schools, starting at the primary school level. A complete and thorough understanding of the principles of harvesting natural resources in a finite system, Earth, must be a significant and required instruction at all levels of education. And, as with *all* crucial problems and crises, the search and creative journey to find viable, healthy solutions for *all* life on this planet must be built into the everyday curriculum, conversations and writings.

Time *is* of the essence and, as we witness across the globe, our blatant and egotistical mindset to ‘control nature’ does not achieve any of the solutions, but only exacerbates the crisis. For thousands of years, humans lived in harmony with the natural world, learning life lessons from all the wilds of life. We have ventured so far away from those valuable and life-enhancing lessons. It is time to learn from nature again, to listen and observe and accept the knowledge the Earth offers unconditionally. We must reciprocate and add gratitude,

appreciation and love back into our lesson plans for our students. Only by allowing these essential elements of education back into our daily classrooms and students' worlds can we hope to heal and revitalize our entire home.

I am a retired high school teacher. I created, directed and taught the Green Career Program at Montgomery High School in Santa Rosa, California. This program consisted of two Sustainable Practices courses, which I wrote. Each provided an overview of world problems, with monthly theme topics/issues such as water, forests, oceans, social equity, energy, sustainable versus non-sustainable agriculture, environmental justice, environmental health and much more. Each month, for the entire month, students would study intensely one of these issues – say, water. It would start from the individual student's use (personalizing the issue), then expand to family, neighborhood, community, city, county, state, nation and, finally, global, with an intense examination of our water resources, uses and pollution, culminating at the month's end with reports and investigations into viable solutions to pressing problems. By the time the first-year Sustainable Practices course was completed, students would have gleaned abundant knowledge of our pressing environmental problems and the tangible consequences to all life forms – a true knowledge of the interconnective vision of all things on Earth. The next year's course was Sustainable Practices II, a more hands-on, project-oriented, solutions-based course for second-year students. These courses were prerequisites for the junior- and senior-year internship program, which I will describe later. The classes also culminated in a week-long climate conference, whereby 30 students per class would be assigned a country and study all aspects of that country in relationship to climate change, environmental and social equity, economy and land base. After a two-week gathering of facts, our climate conference would begin. Facilitated by the instructor, talks, issues and solutions would be discussed and implemented. I would at this point invite our district superintendent, school board members, and our senators and Congress representatives. Many attended and were thoroughly amazed by the students' knowledge and negotiation skills.

I also taught two Environmental Health courses, which focused mostly on health and welfare issues, such as good nutrition, diseases, pollution and chemical agriculture (Big Ag), continuing education (college or trade schools), personal care, and the individual consequences of our choices for both the environment and all life. These classes were focused on the individual student's life and personal empowerment in their choices during their life. These classes were freshman-year courses, and used for recruiting serious students into the Green Career Program. All students throughout my program were required to maintain a 'C' or above in all their other courses. Our Wood Shop instructor taught Green Building as a supporting course, and Sophomore Science also instructed with me. One example of students' work was the '30-Second Elevator Talk'. The main goal of this assignment was to create 'student voice' by placing me as a US congressman; the student would step into an elevator to get across their message of concern to the 'congressman' in a 30-second elevator ride. My

students loved this assignment and all did extremely well, with many asking for a meeting at another time to discuss their issue.

One very important and 'much-loved' segment of the Sustainable Practices I course was an open-ended, spirited class discussion period on day-to-day issues, worldwide stories and events. This segment was usually done 'impromptu', with articles and news events I would find, copy and distribute to teams of students (usually two to three students per team), who would then read them, discuss within their group and then present to the class for discussion. The discussions were facilitated by the instructor, and we would actually engulf entire two-hour periods with vibrant discussions on a gamut of issues. As I stated, the students loved these discussion sessions and often, through feedback from parents, the issues traveled home those days for lively discussions around the dinner table. This sort of instruction must have an instructor who is comfortable with improvising lessons and quickly reorganizing instruction. But without a doubt, there were incredibly important and fruitful discussions held by all.

The Green Career Internship Program

Only committed and dedicated juniors and seniors were allowed onto this program. They had to have completed at least one year of the Sustainable Practices course and shown a good working knowledge of the issues, which would then translate to their desire to train and work in a green profession. Examples of green internships throughout my years teaching and directing this program included solar companies, green construction (following new green building codes in our county), county and state water resources management, riparian restoration agencies and land trusts, permaculture and sustainable agriculture with an emphasis on regenerative farming, the Bodega Marine Laboratory, nutritional assistants with doctors, assisted-living facilities, elementary schools, environmental reporting for local newspapers, green mechanics (for electric vehicles), working for our district and Washington, DC congressional representatives, and school garden mentors for elementary schools. One example of a truly progressive internship was with the solar industry, whereby scores of my students became trained and certified solar installers before they graduated high school. I had ex-gang members dedicate themselves to my program and become not only certified solar installers at 17 and 18 years of age, but also foremen of their crews at 20 years of age, completely turning their lives around for the betterment of themselves, their families and the community.

Industry leaders backed this program enthusiastically, and so many students went to work at their respective internship companies and organizations, with most companies helping these students complete their college courses while employing them. The companies' investment in these devoted young women and men truly paid dividends for each company or organization. Plus, each student understood the importance of their work in

relationship to a healthy planet and ecosystem, and social equity, obtaining morally and ethically enhanced jobs.

I believe that the model I have described can work throughout *all* high schools. I also believe that environmental education and sustainable practices should be a requirement for K–12 grades, with school gardens at every level and in every school. Our daily curriculums *must* be saturated with these issues and lessons if we are to truly set the tone for the survival of our children, and equip them with the knowledge they so desperately need from today's curriculum. They must live sustaining practices and understand *why* they are training in green jobs. That knowledge is invaluable and builds a complete human being, one with empathy and compassion for all life and a highly developed mind and heart for social justice and equity.

The students were also guided to develop their voice, to be able to speak on behalf of the planet and its needs, which helped greatly in the reduction of student eco-anxiety and stress from hearing about the crises but having no dialogue or voice in the matter, or the knowledge skills to cope with the world they were being handed. Each year, we were invited to attend many conferences, and I would take four or five students to speak at each conference, at times in front of 400-500 attendees. These students were indeed the stars of these conferences.

The student voice – the courage, dedication and desire to speak on any and all of the issues to adults and fellow students – was an amazing gift to me and to themselves. Their confidence and mastery of the knowledge in all the environmental and social issues allowed them to express themselves with passion and without fear. They truly were the 'rock stars' for a sustainable world and important education.

Extensions of the Green Career Program were the School Garden Mentor Program and the Energy Ambassador Program, which paid high school students to teach and mentor elementary students in school gardens and energy, thereby creating a true cycle of green jobs and green education in K–12.

We must also include in our new curriculum a new 'love' for our natural world. We must discuss empathy, compassion, reciprocity, gratitude, ethical and morally responsible jobs, and the Pledge of the Children's Fire, practiced by indigenous tribes throughout the world, which states: 'No law, no decision, no commitment, no action, nothing of any kind will be permitted to go forth from any council of leaders that will harm the children' (MacCartney, 2018, p. 177). Our home, Planet Earth, is deeply hurting. All life is being subjected to extreme and unending harm. We must truly give our children the best education, the best knowledge and opportunity to inherit and achieve a healthy future. The education system we are offering falls far short in achieving these goals. It is our responsibility and our commitment to our children to teach, to guide and to give each child a voice and opportunity to have a healthy future throughout the world, for all children, human and non-human.

Lastly, at the beginning of my program, I was assigned 31 sophomores who each had three or four 'Fs' on their freshman report card and had already

been 'labeled' as 'at risk'. Of those 31 sophomores, we graduated 31, with all achieving at least a 2.5-3.0 grade point average, and many already certified in solar installation and working for local solar companies. Yes, I was so proud of them. Yes, the program worked incredibly well and, on my retirement and handing over the program to another fully trained instructor, we had 150 students enrolled in the Green Career Program. On a sadder note, in 2017, due to 'budget cuts', the program was scrapped. At the school board meeting that night, over 120 students, parents and graduated students of the program attended to support the program they loved. The school board praised the program, yet cut it anyway. Blindness and ignorance have many faces in decision-making.

As of this writing, I am still receiving so many letters from former students, thanking me and the program for setting them on the journey of healing, sustainability and health – scores working in green jobs, finishing degrees in environmental science, sustainability or organic agriculture, and working for organizations focused on healing and honoring our Mother Earth. They understand the importance of gratitude and reciprocity, and 'doing no harm' to their cherished home.

My passion to guide, to assist and to mentor students and teachers is still afire. The responsibility falls on all adults within our home, Earth, to gift our children the very best, healthiest and livable future. It is this that our children are asking – no, demanding – of us all. It is the most important work we shall ever do, and it must happen *now*, not a year or two from now, but immediately and profoundly. We must embrace a world where every human being is important and has their wonderful talents nurtured and utilized. We must educate to love the natural world again and reciprocate for all the blessed gifts Mother Nature bestows on us. We must honor the healers and learn from them, human and non-human. And we must all listen, once more, to the songs of the natural world, for they are beautiful and plentiful, if we simply listen.

Note

- [1] The Green New Deal is a proposed package of US legislation that aims to address climate change and economic inequality. It combines Roosevelt's economic approach with modern ideas such as renewable energy and resource efficiency. In order to address these critical issues, we must first reteach in K–12 grades and involve parents in this new education model. Environmental issues, sustainable practices, organic and regenerative agriculture, nutrition and earth science, plus Indigenous practices, must become a priority throughout all curricula. If we are to truly 'be the change', we must be educated in how to accomplish these major goals.

References

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