

Educating A New Generation Of Environmental Stewards



Darien Clary strives to enhance sustainability programs to decrease costs while conserving the environment and being responsive to the dynamic local community. As the sustainability manager for the Austin Independent School District (AISD), she implements programs and tracks performance in water and energy conservation,

alternative transportation, recycling and composting, access to nature, green building, and school engagement. A key component of AISD sustainability initiatives is helping schools manage and divert waste for beneficial uses.

“One of the most rewarding parts of integrating sustainability into a school district is the opportunity to build excitement and capacity in our students to address real-world challenges through a holistic lens,” says Clary. “The schools become ‘living labs’ where student initiatives serve as tools for project-based learning while advancing sustainability at the district. In particular, students get really excited about composting and recycling.”

Clary notes that students can take active roles in their own cross-curricular learning through composting and recycling, as they use their knowledge to calculate waste volumes, plan a social marketing campaign, conduct life cycle assessments, design graphics for signs, and create school competitions. “Waste diversion has become a wonderful approach to not only implement responsible practices at the district level, but to enhance learning in a way that resonates with

our students while providing them with opportunities for leadership and action,” she says.

Clary earned a master’s degree in behavioral science and global health from The University of Texas at Austin and a bachelor’s degree in biology from Southwestern University. She is also a proud AISD graduate. While Austin is Clary’s hometown, she spent years living in Spain, Germany, and the Dominican Republic before settling back in Austin to work on sustainability in the public education sector.

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While in the Dominican Republic, Clary managed sustainable development initiatives for Columbia University’s Center for Environment, Economy, and Society. All projects were community-based and aimed to promote economic and community development through environmental preservation and resource management. Some initiatives included water quality and access programs, creating a kayaking and birding ecotourism program to conserve a nearby lagoon while creating income for local fisherman, establishing coral reef and river monitoring systems, and advising local and national policymakers on resource management and sustainable community development.

“A common thread between my work in international development and here in Austin is education,” notes Clary. “While in the Dominican Republic, I quickly learned that education had to be built onto the front



end of any program. Through the process of inquiry and finding answers together, community members became impassioned about the issue and took charge to devise solutions. When I see that ‘aha’ spark, I know innovation and action are just around the corner.”

Clary loves to bring people together through a spirit of collaboration and mobilizing local resources and believes that schools present a wonderful opportunity to pair sustainable initiatives with educational opportunities. She works closely with Texas Disposal Systems (TDS), the district’s waste service provider, whose Eco Academy program educates K-12 students in Central Texas about trash, recycling, and composting options in their schools, as well as diversion best practices. The program was designed to teach the next generation the importance of minimizing waste and equip students with the tools needed to lead green lifestyles.



TDS also provides recycling and composting data for each school to track their progress.

The school district works with a variety of additional community partners to align sustainability goals and strategies to not only benefit AISD facilities and students but to help the larger community and partner organizations achieve their sustainability targets as well. As such, AISD is aligned with the City of Austin’s zero waste goal to reduce landfill waste by 90 percent by 2040. In addition to recycling in every school, food waste composting is practiced in more than 100 school cafeterias, with 100 percent of schools anticipated to be composting by the end of this year. Since 2011, AISD has diverted over 25 million pounds of waste from the landfill through composting and recycling.

“With the help of community partners like TDS, AISD sustainability programs help build a culture of environmental awareness and action while enhancing educational outcomes for our most precious resource and future leaders – our students,” says Clary.

Learn more about TDS’ Eco Academy program and how to get involved at www.ecoacademy.org. To learn more about AISD Sustainability, visit www.austinisd.org/sustainability.

