

Charter school first in O.C. to win Green Ribbon award

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ALISO VIEJO – The keen-eyed fourth-graders expertly scan Journey School's Native Garden, deftly grabbing stems to yank the unwanted invaders from the ground.

The garden is one of five at the K-8 public charter school, each carefully tended by students, teachers and parents and intricately woven into daily lessons.

It is for those reasons that on Earth Day, Journey became Orange County's first school to win a U.S. Department of Education 2013 Green Ribbon Award.

Teachers and administrators include environmental awareness and sustainability in all parts of the curriculum and daily life, leading Journey School to be one of the 64 schools – and just five across California – honored in the Green Ribbon Award's second year.

While the fourth-graders tend to the indigenous and medicinal plants in the Native Garden, third-graders are busy practicing fractions by measuring wood for 10 birdhouses they'll place around the campus. Being eco-friendly is a lifestyle built into the curriculum for students at Journey School.

"It's fun because we're helping the planet and that seems fun to me," said fourth-grader Mia Kaplan, 10. "I want our school to be beautiful."

The students practice compassion toward each other and toward nature, third-grade teacher Amanda Simmons said. On their field trip nature walks, kids often bring along trash bags to pick up litter. Many students also choose to spend recesses harvesting, Simmons said. Parents get involved too, and help out at the school all week long.

"We work together, and it's a family," Simmons said. "It's not just a place where you drop your child off in the morning and hope for the best."

Eighth-graders Quinn Shaw and classmate Nick Rocha, both 14, have put their skills to use. Shaw worked with her mother and sister to plant strawberries and tomatoes in their yard at home. Rocha helped a family friend prune trees – and taught him the proper way to cut branches.

"There should be more people who actually care about the Earth," said Annie Crow, 14.

Many of Journey's eighth-grade students have known each other since kindergarten or first grade. Their class established the third-grade garden, and they remember painting the fence around the plot of soil. Later, the students learned to graft branches on an apple tree, and now the school boasts a tree that produces different kinds of apples.

The campus has 40 fruit trees. Greenery is apparent in all areas of the campus, with potted plants lining the ramps to each classroom door. The 340 students in all grades take eco-literacy classes, where they learn composting, biology, water conservation, Native American culture, plant studies, permaculture and eco-leadership. School lunches are served with minimal waste and maximum composting potential.

Gardening seems like a normal part of school life, said Piper Graber, 14.

"Growing up here, it sort of opens you up to this lifestyle," Graber said.

The school's award application noted the pervasiveness of its green culture, along with desirable outcomes: On last year's standardized state tests, 96 percent of fifth-graders and 81 percent of eighth-graders at Journey scored proficient or advanced in science.

The school leases space from Capistrano Unified School District, but administrators are hoping to expand. Journey School has launched a development office with help from private donors so the school won't be so dependent on per-pupil funding from the state, Executive Director Shaheer Flatas said. In the fall, the school will begin a capital campaign to find a permanent campus.

Journey School opened in 2000 with about 90 students in kindergarten to third grade. Teachers and staff follow the Waldorf education model with a focus on the environment and weaving together academics, arts and ethics, Flatas said.

"Journey is a place where students love coming to school. The reason they love coming to school is because they are nurtured and challenged in every way," Flatas said.

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