

Name:

Margaret A. Redman

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Title:

Keeping Green Schoolyards Green: A Study Of Challenges And Success Strategies For The Long-Term Sustainability Of Schoolyard Habitats

Committee:

Dr. E.C.M. Parsons, Thesis Director

Dr. Gregory Guagnano, Committee Member

Dr. Joseph Maxwell, Committee Member

ABSTRACT

Despite the well-researched benefits of nature exposure for physical and emotional well-being, children today spend less time outdoors than in years past. As a result, the green schoolyard movement, which aims to transform school campuses from grass and asphalt to diverse havens of nature, has emerged to address this issue. A wealth of information is available to educators on how and why to begin green schoolyard projects, but little empirical research exists on sustaining these projects for many years after their installation. This study used interviews and survey data to examine schools involved with the National Wildlife Federation's Schoolyard Habitats program to identify challenges associated with green schoolyards and strategies used to avoid or overcome these challenges. The mean habitat certification date of the schools selected for interviews was late 2002. Three hundred six (306) of these schools still maintained their habitats and used them for educational purposes, while 136 schools had removed their habitats or no longer used them. Challenges to habitat sustainability cited by interviewees were

separated into three categories: challenges arising from 1) habitat design and location, including safety and usability issues, wildlife conflicts, damage, and weather and seasonality; 2) the school environment, including constrictive curriculum, lack of teacher involvement, lack of time, unsupportive administration, and lack of funding; and 3) lack of community involvement, including lack of understanding, maintenance, and difficulties with the habitat workforce. One of the most readily apparent causes of habitat abandonment was turnover of habitat leaders, which was mentioned by numerous interviewees. Additionally, schools that experienced low turnover of habitat leaders were 28% more likely to still use their habitats than schools with complete turnover of habitat leaders. Elevating habitats to school priorities by involving more teachers and community members, gaining upfront administrative support, and incorporating the habitat projects into school culture was seen as important to avoid the challenges posed by turnover. Suppliers of green schoolyard grants should also consider needs-based applications in their decisions, because schools in areas with high and low rates of poverty experienced different levels of funding-based challenges. Since green schoolyards have the potential to provide wildlife habitat in urbanized landscapes and to boost mindfulness of the environment in young people, increasing the long-term success rates of green schoolyard projects could have major implications for conservation.