



Grantee Highlight: School Grant

Banning Expanded Polystyrene

Charter Oak International Academy

West Hartford, CT

Organization Overview

Charter Oak International Academy is an international baccalaureate elementary magnet school in West Hartford. Their mission is “to inspire and prepare all students to realize their potential and enhance our global community.” This school is actively focused on environmentalism, is a green LEAF school and considers themselves to have a culture of sustainability.

How has RecycleCT helped?

Purchasing reusable lunch trays for the cafeteria lined up with the school’s goal to reduce waste by 50%. Previously, the school was serving meals on expanded polystyrene (commonly known as Styrofoam™) trays which created a large volume of waste. Kim Hughes, an environmental educator and longtime school volunteer and parent shared that “we realized pretty early on that focusing on the waste was the best way to get the attention of students and our community.” The school had recently shifted from plastic utensils to reusable and washable flatware to reduce waste in the cafeteria. The expanded polystyrene trays were consistently overflowing out of waste bins making it the school’s new focus for waste reduction.



Charter Oak students participating in a waste sort.



Charter Oak students using their new reusable trays.

While the intention was to help reduce waste, the switch to reusable trays has changed student behavior. Students are now more accurately disposing of waste and recyclables in the proper bins (the school has a recycling and food waste collection system) and reducing the number of times the custodial staff has to remove trash from four to six times per day to just once a day.

This project strengthened relationships and led to having support for a grow lab in the school’s cafeteria and led to a more sustainable-focused school community. Being the first school to do this work has led them to be looked to for help at schools that want to do similar sustainable measures, Hughes shared, “I really want to make sure it’s clear how far reaching and how important this information is; [...] to have [this] knowledgeable resource that is Charter Oak”

Waste is an issue of environmental justice for everyone in the school community; it's a topic that everyone can see. Charter Oak's success with the reusable trays has caught the attention of other schools in West Hartford and Kim is supporting the efforts to attain grant funding to transition four additional schools to these trays.

At the elementary education level we see more clearly now than ever, how important it is to connect this to children's lives because they are the future and instilling these values at a young age will allow for a cleaner environment.

-Kim Hughes



Charter Oak students sharing results of their waste audit and sustainability efforts to the West Hartford Board of Education, including news of receiving RecycleCT Innovation Grant.

Future Plans

This project was a catalyst for waste audits and continued work around sustainability and waste for the school community. This project is ongoing but it's not expected to change much, it's a one-time funded project. There may be a need for replacement trays in the future but that should be far down the line.

The RecycleCT Foundation, Inc. seeks to promote and support programs that educate Connecticut students or the public about waste reduction, reuse, recycling and composting to increase these activities in the state.
<http://www.RecycleCT.com>