



# Escuela Verde

Developing 21<sup>st</sup> Century Leaders through an Innovative Project-Based Learning Model



A TransCenter for Youth, Inc. School

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# Instructional Design

Escuela Verde's learning practices are grounded in the EdVisions project-based learning model.



As an EdVisions school, we have incorporated four “design essentials” into our operations:

- Small learning communities
- Self-directed, project-based learning
- Authentic assessment
- Teacher ownership/democratic governance

At Escuela Verde, 7-12<sup>th</sup> grade students engage in rigorous research in order to answer a complex question, problem, or challenge. With the guidance of an advisor, students self-select the state-approved educational standards they will address with each of their projects. Through many one-on-one consultations with their advisors, students assess and reassess their learning until they are satisfied with their projects. At the end of each completed project, students make presentations describing the steps undertaken to complete the project, the skills acquired during the process, and the value of the product to the student and the overall community. This presentation is made to the original team that approved the project proposal. This team, in collaboration with the presenting student, renders the final assessment of the project and determines how many and what category of credit hours (rather than grades) will be awarded for this project. The team's decision is based on time spent, skills/competencies acquired, and the quality of the product.



Project-Based Learning allows students to learn in a natural environment about the subjects that they are interested in. We believe that allowing students to construct their own learning in an environment that values inquisitiveness, curiosity, and inventiveness leads to authentic, real-life learning. We acknowledge that students are also expected to perform at the same testing levels as their peers in traditional school, and we firmly believe that the skills students acquire and exercise while in a Project-Based Learning environment will serve to prepare them for these standardized assessments. In summary, we believe in Project-Based Learning because it satisfies the needs of the whole person and prepares them for a fruitful life during and after their educational journey. We use the Hope Survey to assess the school climate using the indicators of engagement, academic rigor, goal orientation, belongingness, and autonomy.

## PROJECT-BASED LEARNING LEVELS

Because the Escuela Verde staff recognizes that students require support in their transition from traditional learning to project-based learning, they periodically assess the project-based learning level of all students based on their behavior in school, credit-earning ability, and project development. All students participate in determining their level of achievement, which occurs during a student/advisor meeting. While students may fall anywhere within the continuum of project-based learning levels, it is expected that all students strive to reach the **Interdependent** level.



### *Independent*

- Somewhat engaged
- “Performance” Goal Orientation- for requirement, to demonstrate superiority or avoid the appearance of failure.
- Internal locus of causality
- Resistant to work with others
- Low or acceptable Academic Press

### *Interdependent*

- Highly engaged
- “Learning” Goal Orientation-for Enjoyment and Personal Interest
- Internal locus of causality
- Strong, mutually supportive relationships
- High Academic Press

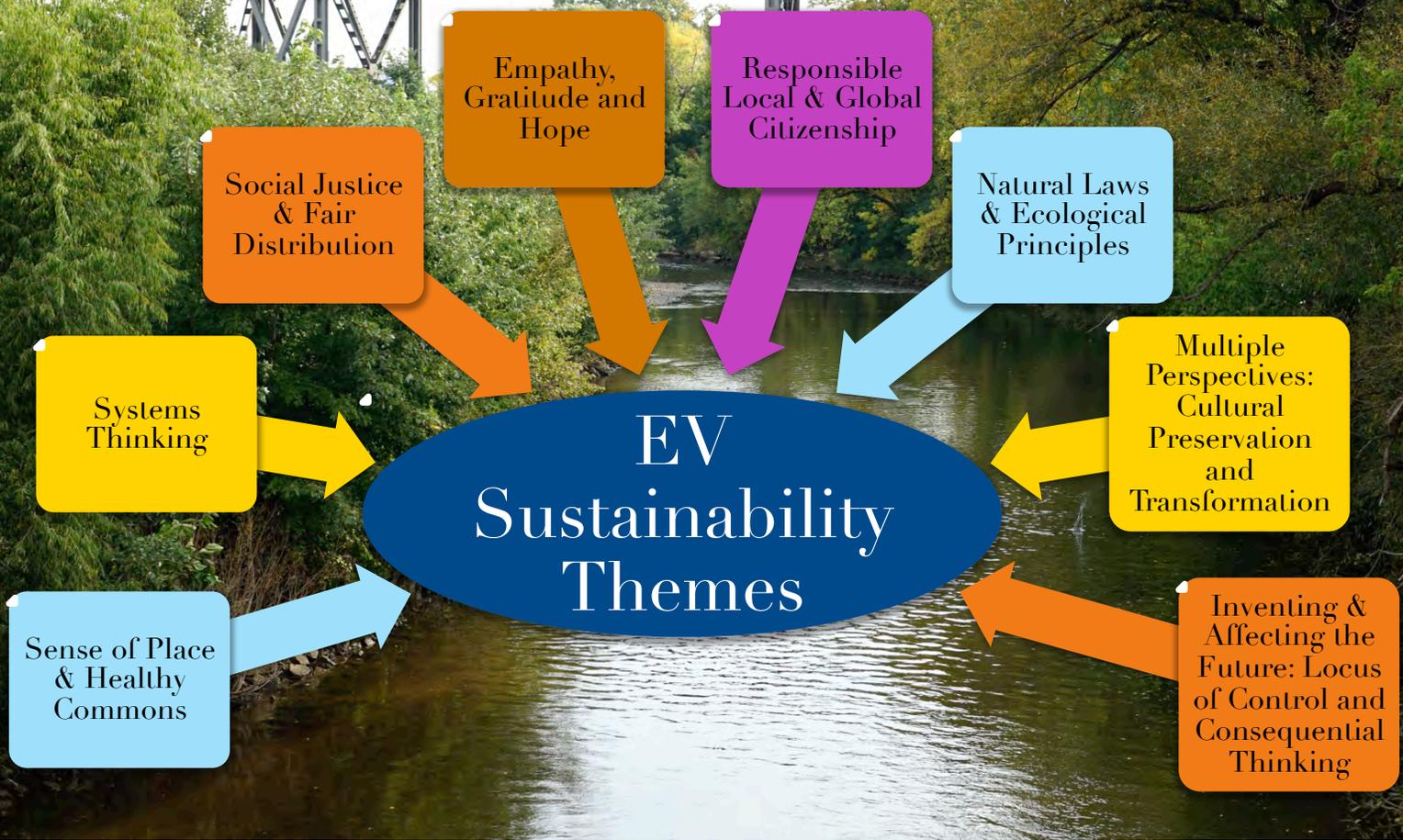


### *Explorer*

- Lack of engagement
- “Performance” Goal Orientation- for requirement, to demonstrate superiority or avoid the appearance of failure.
- External locus of causality
- Resistant to work with others
- Low or unacceptable Academic Press

### *Transitional*

- Highly or somewhat engaged
- “Learning” Goal Orientation-for Enjoyment and Personal Interest
- External locus of causality
- Strong, mutually supportive relationships
- Low or acceptable Academic Press



*This figure represents the eight sustainability themes that are featured over the course of two years. It is believed that each of these themes plays a critical role in being a part of a sustainable community.*

Have you ever wondered how the zip code you live in affects your access to quality food? How systems in government affect our environment? In the face of injustice, what do you do? These are some of the essential questions Escuela Verde students ponder during our advisory time, through exploration of these sustainability themes.

As part of our school-wide curriculum, we engage in advisory time every day. In addition to morning and afternoon check-ins, multi-age advisories of up to twenty students meet for thirty-five minutes daily. These advisory workshops are dedicated to work on climate aspects of the school, while scaffolding skills and behaviors to help students become exemplary project-based learners. Integral to this process are quarterly Education for Sustainability themes that were developed by the staff from several sources including the Wisconsin Center for Environmental Education and the Cloud Institute for Sustainability Education.

To solidify the school focus of sustainability and restorative justice, EV has three curricular lenses integrated throughout the year:

- Ecology,
- Justice, and
- Peace.

# Profile of a Project

One example of a quarter-long advisory project that incorporated the Responsible Local and Global Citizenship sustainability theme was our exploration of scientists. This project challenged the students' notions of who and what a scientist looks like and what scientists do. Our aim was to empower students to become citizen scientists by collecting data that was used to study our local rivers. This all-school advisory project included steps for students to practice the action research process, including:

## **Background Research**

Students learned how local water scientists use the data collected from our rivers and learned how to use various instruments to collect data. These included digital microscopes, digital weather stations, GPS tools, dip nets, macroinvertebrate bioindicator charts and secchi tubes.

## **Taking Action**

Each advisory split into four groups and collected data based on student interest: Digital Data, Water Action Volunteers, Biotic Index and Shoreline Measurements.

## **Analyzing and Interpreting Data**

Students worked with scientists from the Sixteenth Street Community Health Clinic, the Urban Ecology Center and Discovery World to analyze and interpret their qualitative and quantitative data. They created a shared document so the community organizations could use the data, and they triangulated their results with other advisories.

## **Presenting their Findings**

Students presented their findings to each other, to community members at a Presentation Night, and used the data to make creative projects for the community science fair, Science Strikes Back.



Escuela Verde is committed to providing a safe, positive, productive, and nurturing educational environment for all of its students. Restorative Justice is a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs, and obligations, in order to heal and put things as right as possible. Escuela Verde practices Restorative Justice. We believe that those who have violated certain school rules should have to face or restore damage done to the victims or property. The consequence should address the issue of repairing the damage or correcting the behavior in respect for and remorse toward the victim(s).

The restorative justice mindset relies on five key principles:

- Focus on the harms and consequent needs of the victims, as well as the communities' and the offenders'
- Address the obligations that result from those harms
- Use inclusive, collaborative processes
- Involve those with a legitimate stake in the situation, including victims, offenders, community members, and society
- See to put right the wrongs

*- Adapted from The Little Book of Restorative Justice by Howard Zehr*



“The restorative justice process encourages students to work together to find solutions and prevent future incidents. It helps children to mature and learn to manage their behaviors. My participation in the process made me so proud and it was empowering for the student.”

-- Board Member comment, 2016

# Restorative Justice Mindset



A group of students is walking away from the camera on a wooden boardwalk that winds through a dense, sun-dappled forest. The students are dressed in casual attire like t-shirts, hoodies, and shorts. The trees are tall and leafy, creating a canopy overhead. The overall atmosphere is peaceful and natural.

Imagine how students' lives  
would be different if...

...their school asked them who they want  
to **be** instead of what they want to **do**.

...their teachers asked how they could **help** them  
instead of telling them what they **need** to **do**.

...their community treated them as  
an **asset** instead of a **burden**.

...their teachers modeled taking **action** for **change**.

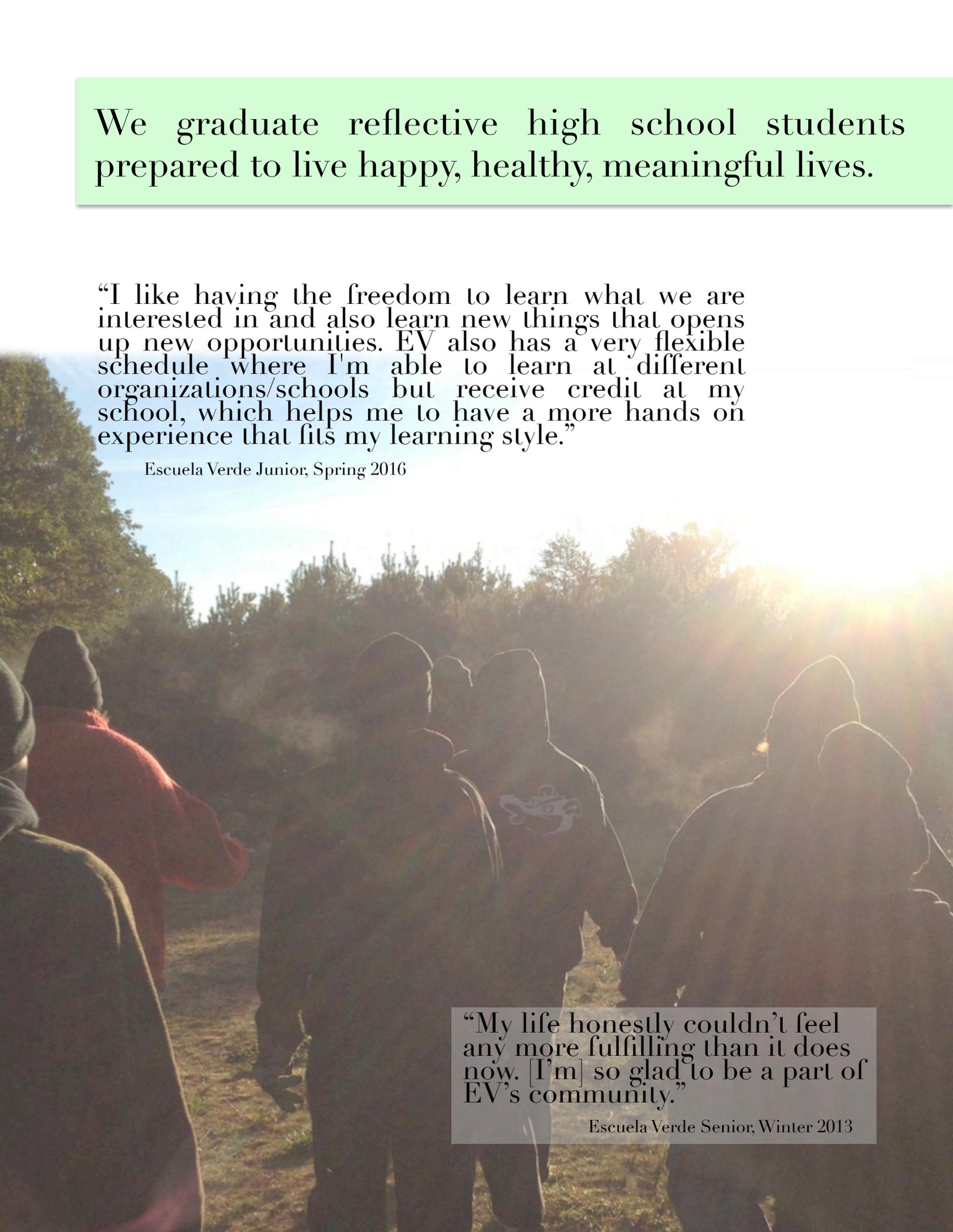
# Escuela Verde cultivates a community that is participatory, just, sustainable and peaceful.

At Escuela Verde, our vision is our guiding star; it is the scale upon which we weigh all of our decisions, big and small. It is the true fulfillment of our vision that led to a move into a bigger, better-equipped building with green space and in close proximity to educational resources such as: the Urban Ecology Center Menomonee Valley, the Wisconsin Bike Federation, Three Bridges Park, and Arlington Heights Park. A large percentage of our student body currently lives in the neighborhoods that make up Layton Boulevard West (Silver City, Burnham Park, and Layton Park). Community residents informed our school leaders that they were ready for the kind of education that was participatory, just, sustainable and peaceful.



The presence of Escuela Verde in the Layton Boulevard West neighborhood:

- Improves the Physical Infrastructure of the Neighborhood:** By maintaining its private properties and public spaces and engaging the community in cleanup and restoration efforts.
- Promotes Community Safety:** By maintaining a peaceful, clean, and well-maintained campus where all feel safe and welcome.
- Builds Social Engagement:** By creating strong relationships that develop a sense of community and encourage collaboration.
- Develops Youth Education and Leadership:** By supporting youth in achieving their potential, both academically and personally, and encouraging them to serve and lead in the community as they develop life and work skills.
- Encourages Healthy Living:** By promoting physical, emotional, and social well-being.



We graduate reflective high school students prepared to live happy, healthy, meaningful lives.

“I like having the freedom to learn what we are interested in and also learn new things that opens up new opportunities. EV also has a very flexible schedule where I'm able to learn at different organizations/schools but receive credit at my school, which helps me to have a more hands on experience that fits my learning style.”

Escuela Verde Junior, Spring 2016

“My life honestly couldn't feel any more fulfilling than it does now. [I'm] so glad to be a part of EV's community.”

Escuela Verde Senior, Winter 2013

At Escuela Verde, the students we serve are our top priority. We truly believe that, as the philosopher Freire proposed, education is “an instrument of liberation”; our hope is that, when students embrace education as the key to their own personal liberation and self-actualization, they will forge their own path to a happy, healthy, meaningful life. We help students to do this by providing them with opportunities to grow academically, socially, and emotionally. We see this fitting perfectly with Layton Boulevard West’s Quality of Life Plan because one of its focal points is to promote Youth Education and Leadership. Escuela Verde does just that.

#### Academics:

- Rigorous, self-directed project-based curriculum designed through student-advisor collaboration
- Math curriculum based on Common Core Math Standards that allows every student to start at their own level and push themselves
- Reading curriculum based on student choice and the latest theories of adolescent reading development
- Hands-on science curriculum based on Next Generation Science Standards

#### Emotional Growth:

- Restorative Justice practices woven into school culture
- Students trained in Restorative Justice leaders within the school
- Small school atmosphere promotes strong relationships
- Overnight experiences develop reflective practice that helps to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop student’s capacity to contribute to their communities

My son gets to be himself! He is an incredibly bright kid who has been frustrated and discouraged in other school environments. This is the first time he has been at a school that he enjoys attending. The staff encourage him in his interests and completely accept him for who he is. I am grateful for this school on a daily basis.

- Parent Comment, Fall 2016

Escuela Verde is at the forefront of producing young adults who will be “disruptors” and reshape the future of our society.

- Chris Litzau, Executive Director, Milwaukee Community Service Corps

#### Social Opportunities:

- One-room-schoolhouse feel encourages collaboration and camaraderie among students and staff
- Extra-curricular clubs such as Rocket Club and Theater Troupe take students out into the community
- Internship and work study opportunities bring students into local business and organizations for real world experience
- Athletics such as basketball, volleyball and soccer encourage teamwork and healthy living



We collaborate with the community to create a strong sense of place and skills to flourish without harm.



The students of Escuela Verde are encouraged to see themselves as members of a community – within the school, in their neighborhood, in their city, in any number of self-identified groups and as part of a global community. As a school, we foster opportunities for students to connect with these various communities on a regular basis – sometimes in a whole-school mandatory setting, and sometimes on the basis of interest. These opportunities extend beyond the school day into extra-curricular clubs and after-school activities. Many of the organizations we connect our students with prominently feature healthy living and neighborhood improvement as key elements of their mission, which brings us in line with the goals of Layton Boulevard West’s Quality of Life Plan. Our students have also received grants and scholarships from organizations prominent in our community such as the State Farm Youth Advisory Board and the Midwest Renewable Energy Association.

### A few examples...

**Urban Ecology Center and US Forest Service**  
UEC and EV developed and hosted a series of workshops to address topics of bird physiology and migration, ornithological field research methods, conservation and data visualization and management with our Field Research Team. Six students were selected to receive in-depth field training and one-on-one mentorship in forested locations within three urban parks of Milwaukee. Field training sessions covered bird banding, including the proper use of mist nets, safe handling and banding techniques of wild birds and ethical issues of ornithological field research.

**Artists Working with Education (AWE)**  
Students develop their talents through collaborative projects led by local artists. Students interview the artists and select who they would like to work with each year, and projects involve aspects of social and eco-justice issues. Last year’s project revolved around storytelling and immigration and resulted in a mural installation under the viaduct by our school.

### Some of our other collaborators...

- 4-H & UW-Extension
- Alverno College
- Diverse and Resilient
- Knowledge is Power
- Layton Boulevard West Neighbors
- Lead to Succeed
- Medical College of Wisconsin
- Milwaukee Food Council
- Milwaukee Repertory Theater
- Milwaukee Water Commons
- School of Freshwater Sciences UWM
- TRUESkool
- Urban Underground
- UW Milwaukee
- Voces De La Frontera
- Wisconsin Green Schools Network



We provide staff who model the Escuela Verde vision and embrace education as liberation.

“We **love** having EV as  
**partners**  
in our son’s **education.**”  
— Parent comment, Spring 2013



Escuela Verde staff come from diverse backgrounds, but all share the same belief: education is key to personal liberation, that students must be owners of their education, and that learning is a life-long journey we are all traveling.

### **The Role of the Advisor**

At Escuela Verde, the staff are advisors, rather than teachers. Rather than acting as “the sage on the stage” imparting knowledge on students, we see ourselves as “the guide on the side” working alongside students as they forge their own learning path. That being said, our teachers are all certified and highly qualified with Bachelor, Master, or Doctoral degrees. We use our experience and expertise to help students, but we do not have all the answers. We call on our connections with educators and experts from the community when a student wants to learn more about a topic beyond our knowledge.



The staff at Escuela Verde foster opportunities for the students to not only engage in authentic learning experiences related to sustainability issues in their local communities, but at the state level as well.

Sandra Benton, Co-Founder of Fox River Academy, former President of Wisconsin State Reading Association



### **Life-long Learners**

Escuela Verde staff continually participate in professional development. Some highlights include:

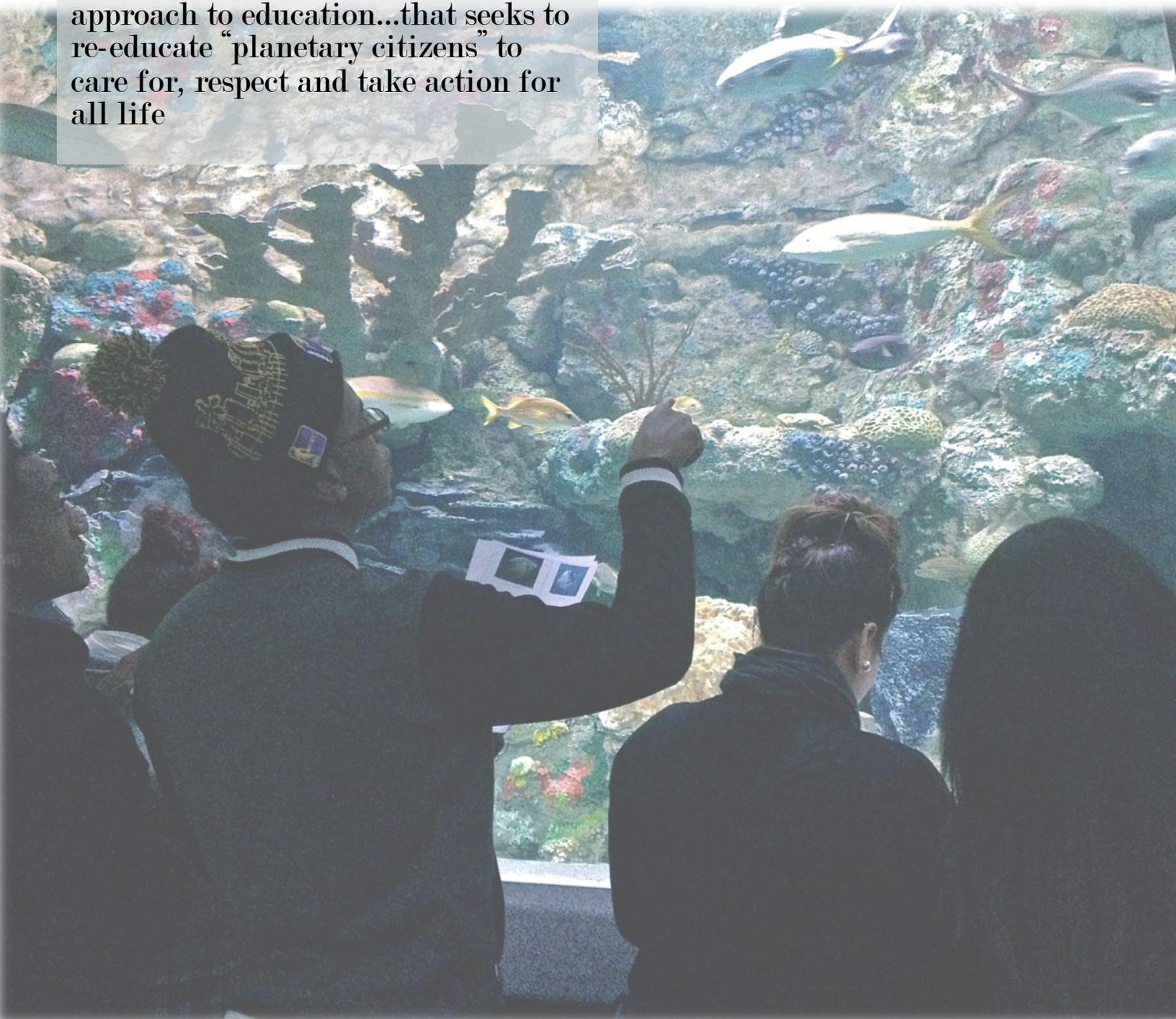
- Environmental education at **Wisconsin Green School’s No Teacher Left Inside Conference**
- Social justice workshops at the **Education for Liberation Network’s Free Minds Free People Conference**
- Intensive reading and math workshops through our partnership with **CESA#1**
- Learning to care for ourselves and each other through collaborative communication coaching the by **Noble Purpose Consulting**
- In addition to being fully certified and highly qualified teachers, many of our staff also hold Doctorate or Master’s degrees in educational fields.
- Staff have been active on such local and national boards as **Serve Marketing**, **Latino Task Force of the United Way of Greater Milwaukee**, **Alverno’s College Research Center for Women and Girls**, **Milwaukee Urban Gardens** and **North American Association of Environmental Educators**



We engage urban youth by adhering to an ecopedagogical praxis.

**praxis** (prăk'sis): reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it

**ecopedagogy** ('i:kəv'pəd'ə-gō'jē): a discourse, a movement, and an approach to education...that seeks to re-educate "planetary citizens" to care for, respect and take action for all life



Young people in Milwaukee are hungering for education that means something. Whereas the 2015 high school graduation rate for Wisconsin was one of the nation's highest at 88.4%, Milwaukee Public School's was one of the lowest at 58.2%. Milwaukee's youth need to see the relevance of attending and completing high school, and Escuela Verde is providing them with that relevant inspiration. We hold project-based ecopedagogy at the heart of what we do, offering young people a culture of sustainability and peace based on cooperation, not competition and built on the beliefs of such educational philosophers as Paulo Friere, Moacir Gadotti, Richard Kahn, and Levana Saxon. We see all of this as a natural extension of the Layton Boulevard West Quality of Life Plan's focus on promoting youth involvement and well-being.



Offering an inclusive process and set of categories is important for the advancement of STEM education to be more broadly distributed and engaged with communities. I truly think this is the formation of a model for disrupting the STEM education discourse, and in the process, bringing more thinkers into the conversation about what it means to solve problems in our community.

--R. Justin Hougham, Ph.D., UW-Extension

### **Youth Participatory Ecojustice Action Research (YPEAR) Projects**

As a Senior Capstone, students are required to develop a project that combines service learning, ecopedagogical praxis, youth participatory action research, and the dissertation process.

Some examples include:

- Jene Tate: How does modeling raptivism affect youth perspective on themselves and their community?
- Leslie Alvarez: In what ways does Mexican American cultural identity affect the influence for healthy living on the South Side of Milwaukee?
- Isabel Castro: In what ways does embracing our cultural identity influence activism in the Latinx community?
- DeAngelo Cortes: In what ways does creating a movement to gather and deliver goods to homeless, whilst gathering local skateboarders affect the view of homeless people and skaters in Milwaukee?
- Donald Harris: How does learning Sense of place with environmental issues affect urban youth's willingness to participate with the environment.



We develop biliteracy and honor linguistic cultural identities by engaging our community in translanguaging practices.

Over the years, our demographic makeup has included an average of 28% English Language Learners and 66% Latinx students. The curricula and practices at our school recognizes, values and builds on first language literacy, along with English literacy through translanguaging practices. Over half of our staff is bilingual or bicultural, and we talk openly about the value of our cultural identities.



At Escuela Verde, every student is required to take two years of Spanish to graduate. In addition, we offer a bilingual education workshop with the goal of exploring, learning and engaging in language, culture, and identity practices to cultivate a participatory community on issues relating to language, culture, and identity oppression. Some of their projects include:

- Learning how music can support and enrich the development of positive self-identity.
- Creating a Language and Literacy Timeline to identify gaps/assets in language development to inform students how they want to proceed with language acquisition as young adults.
- Studying complex issues happening in South America.
- Collaborating with Shorewood High School's Spanish class to bridge communities and learn from each other. We analyzed art together at the Art Institute of Chicago and Walker's Point Center for the Arts by exploring artist identity and culture.



The cultural exchange occurring amongst the students and teaching artists provides space for students to take ownership of the activities happening in their classroom, school and by extension community. As an EV parent and community organizer, I think it is vital that students are able to maintain their identities in a world where much of their identity can be lost and in some instances erased.

-- Nicole Acosta, parent and artist



### Feature Community Events: Dia de los muertos & Noche de Alteres

Students engaged in learning about this Mexican tradition, visited the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago, put on a an event with over 300 people in attendance to honor those who have passed away and share the tradition with others.



We offer immersion opportunities for those interested in transformative education.

Community members from all backgrounds who are passionate about our youth have been welcomed into the Escuela Verde community. The greater educational and research community benefits from our school because of our commitment to:

#### **Long-term Volunteer Placements**

- We're committed to working with full-time service opportunity organizations such as the AmeriCorps family of organizations and other university fellowships.
- University volunteers from Alverno College, Milwaukee School of Engineering, UW-Milwaukee, and UW-Whitewater have worked with our students.
- We have welcomed two principals-in-training to do observations and receive mentorship.

#### **Participatory Action Research**

- We have conducted and disseminated participatory action research gathered within our school, offering our unique voice and perspective at conferences.

#### **Student-led Tours and Presentations**

- Our students and staff have hosted members of the Wisconsin Association of Environmental Educators, the Wisconsin Council on Energy and the Environment, as well as various community organizations from around Milwaukee.
- Our students have presented at the Wisconsin Green Schools Youth Summit, the Wisconsin Association of Environmental Education Annual Conference, the Youth Social Justice Forum, the National Green Schools Conference, National Innovative Schools Network Conference and the North American Association for Environmental Education Conference.



Students learn the art of candle-making and donate the finished product.

Students and staff present at the national Innovative Schools Network Conference.

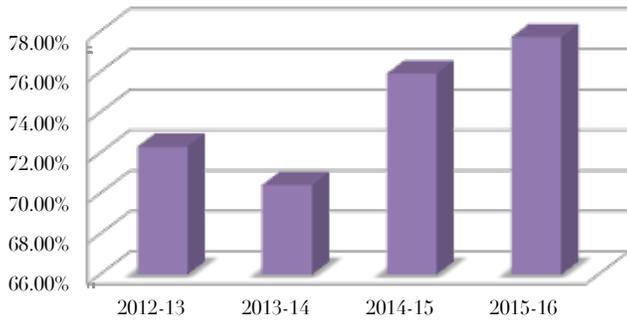


Students launch rockets with the help of Milwaukee School of Engineering students..

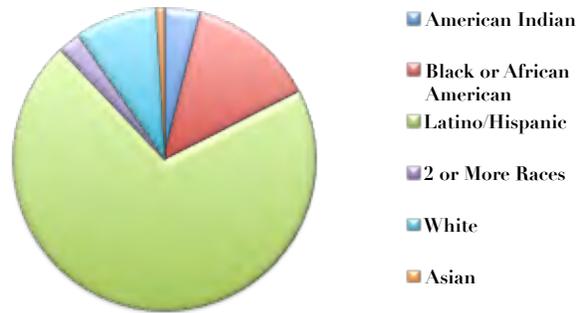
To create a city that is environmentally, economically and socially sustainable, we need curriculum that ensures youth are part of the solution. Escuela Verde ensures sustainability is an integral part of its mission, and is part of the solution for Milwaukee's sustainable future.

Amy Heart,  
Sustainability Program  
Manager, City of Milwaukee  
Office of Environmental  
Sustainability

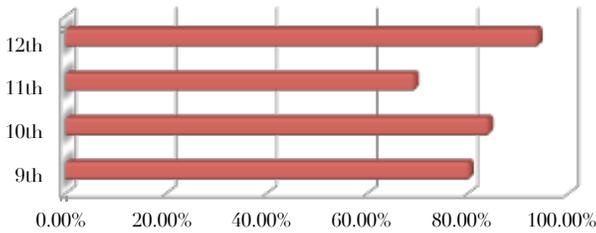
### Overall Annual Scorecard Score



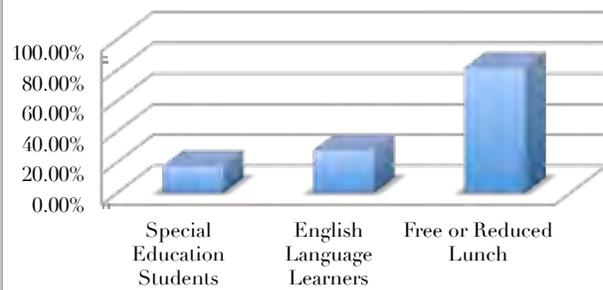
### Race/Ethnicity from 2012-2016



### Average Percentage of Students Promoted/Graduated by Grade from 2012-2016



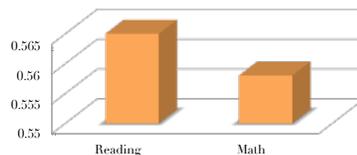
### Average Percentage from 2012-2016



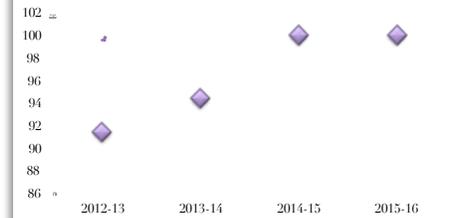
### Student Attendance Rates



### Average Percentage of Students Increasing STAR Scores by One Grade Level from 2012-2016



### Parent Conference Participation



All data has been taken from annual reports that describe the operation of Escuela Verde as a school chartered by the City of Milwaukee. They are the result of intensive work undertaken by the City of Milwaukee Charter School Review Committee (CSRC), school staff, and the NCCD Children's Research Center (CRC). Each year, the CRC meets with school staff to improve strategies to help increase reading, math and writing scores. These strategies include hiring a Reading Specialist, a daily math tutor, and ACT Prep. Full reports can be found at: <http://www.nccdglobal.org>.

# Escuela Verde: By the Numbers



# Ongoing Programmatic Support



Philanthropic support will allow us to continue to expand the kinds of education programming and events that make us one of the most unique schools in the city of Milwaukee.

## Field Trips

Because learning happens everywhere, we take students out into the community as much as possible. Some of our most costly field trips include whole-school day trips during our Welcome Weeks at the beginning of the school year, strategic planning for staff and students at Treehaven in Tomahawk, WI, various educational conferences around the country, and our end-of-the-year camping trip.

## Events

In an effort to engage students, families, and the community, we host a variety of events during the school year. Community Nights and Presentation Nights are a chance for the community to come into the school and for students to show off their work. Our Graduation Celebration focuses on the hard work of our graduating class.

## All-Star Programs

Some schools call it ‘extra-curricular,’ but we call it our All-Star Programs. Students engage in activities that include:

- the Field Research Team working in collaboration with the Urban Ecology Center
- our Theater Troupe in collaboration with Milwaukee Repertory Theater
- our Bilingual Ed group teaming up with students from Shorewood High School
- our Artists collaborating with Artists Working in Education, Inc. to create public art
- our Bike and Skate Team working with the Bicycle Federation of WI
- the Verde Voyagers that take overnight trips around the state
- Athletics, such as girls’ volleyball, boy’s basketball, and co-ed soccer

## Workshops

Students request advisors and community members to lead workshops on various topics of their interest. Some examples are beekeeping with BeePods, drivers education with Wheels, Inc., swimming with the YMCA, and social justice activism with Serve2Unite.





## MISSION

The mission of TransCenter for Youth, Inc. is to provide high quality educational programs that allow “at-risk” youth and others to become productive adults and responsible community members.

TransCenter’s work can be seen as part of an effort to build a New Vision of public education, which begins with the understanding that all children are part of “the public” and that all children deserve adequate public funding equitably distributed to learning environments parents and young people have chosen and that are accountable for results.

## HISTORY

TransCenter for Youth began working with “at-risk” and adjudicated youth in 1969. In May of 1973, TransCenter registered as a nonprofit corporation in the State of Wisconsin and was recognized as a 501 (c)(3) tax-exempt organization by the Internal Revenue Service in the fall of that year. Today, TransCenter for Youth operates five schools in Milwaukee: El Puente High School, Escuela Verde, Northwest Opportunities Vocational Academy (NOVA), NOVA Tech, and Shalom High School.

## A MODEL FOR EDUCATORS & STUDENTS

TransCenter’s schools have been visited and studied by educators from Russia, Japan, Germany, Great Britain, South Africa and from all over the United States. They have been featured in articles and books published by the National Center on Education and the Economy, Jobs for the Future, the Academy for Educational Development, the National Network for Youth, the Wisconsin Association of School Boards, the Carnegie Reporter, and Holistic Education Press.

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