



just as important for kids in Los Angeles to know where their local watershed is, as it is for our Colorado kids to identify a cluster of elderberries.

*A few states westward, education initiatives in sustainability are taking root in Los Angeles, California. Grades of Green got its start in my hometown, a city that has tremendous challenges with its citizens' environmental impact. Growing up we drove everywhere – nearly an hour to school, then another hour to friends' homes, then another hour to our favorite Thai restaurant. The city is expansive, and there is little to no access to public transportation. Angelenos spend endless hours on the 405 or the 5, getting glimpses of California's stunning coast line through the thick layers of smog. In Manhattan Beach, California, Grades of Green took root in the form of mothers recognizing the need for their children to be, as Arin would say, "ecologically literate." We were lucky enough to chat with the Grades of Green folk, a crew of women making a beautiful difference in their global community.*

**WHAT INSPIRED GRADES OF GREEN? WAS THERE A MOMENT OR AN IMPETUS FOR RECOGNIZING THE NEED FOR A NON-PROFIT SUCH AS THIS?**

It was a moment of identifying the need and desire for environmental education and action in schools yet recognizing the reality of shrinking budgets and limited resources, particularly in the public schools. Grades of Green was founded in 2009 by four moms who wanted to bring creative, hands-on environmental education programs to our students. They started in their local school, Grand View Elementary in Manhattan Beach. Grand View Elementary became Grades of Green's pilot school where the original Grades of Green Activities were tested and approved by parents, educators, and

most importantly, students. Since its work at Grand View, Grades of Green now works in schools across 39 states.

**HOW DO YOU GET KIDS INSPIRED TO CARE ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES?**

Any student across the globe can register with our web-based program on the Grades of Green website to gain access and unlock toolkits to over 40 Grades of Green initiatives. Whether a student's environmental passion is energy reduction, water conservation, waste reduction, you name it – we have a Grades of Green initiative and toolkit to help the student start greening and creating change across their school and broader community. In Southern California, we do on-site educating. One of these on-site programs is the Youth Corps Eco-Leadership Program. The Grades of Green Youth Corps is a committed group of selected students actively caring for the environment by creating and implementing a yearlong Green Project in their school community. These total rock stars receive regular guidance and leadership training from passionate Grades of Green staff and a supportive peer network of fellow Youth Corps students. Members become inspired to help the environment and empowered when they see their actions spark change. From banning Styrofoam to starting school-wide waste reduction programs, the awesome Grades of Green Youth Corps students are making huge impacts in their communities.

**WHAT HAVE BEEN THE BENEFITS (ECONOMIC, CULTURAL, ETC.) FOR SCHOOLS THAT HAVE IMPLEMENTED GRADES OF GREEN PROGRAMMING?**

The primary benefit for schools that join the Grades of Green program is creating a school-wide culture of caring for the

environment. Entire school populations become inspired to care for the environment and empowered to create change. Environmental protection becomes truly something that is second nature to students and communities. While inspiring students is our primary goal, schools receive additional benefits when they join the program. Implementing the Grades of Green Activities helps decrease a school's environmental impact, and can save money for the school and parents as well. For example, Grades of Green's Trash Free Lunches activity helps schools divert waste, which then leads to decreased waste hauler pick-ups and less bags of trash produced – one of our schools in Los Angeles is projected to decrease their annual waste hauler fees by nearly \$17,000 a year. In addition, when a student packs a trash-free lunch everyday, parents save an average of \$213 per year.

**WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR MOST SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMS? WHAT ARE THOSE THINGS THAT THE KIDS ARE MOST INSPIRED BY?**

One of our most successful programs is our Trash Free Lunch Challenge. Grades of Green's Trash Free Lunch Challenge is a year long competition where Los Angeles schools challenge each other to see which school can reduce the most lunchtime waste. Through educational assemblies, personalized eco-starter kits, waste reduction plans, and Grades of Green staff available to personally guide each school, Grades of Green helps create an environment where ev-

ery school wins. Participating schools ask students to reduce trash by bringing reusable lunch containers and using lunchtime sorting stations; forming habits that will protect the environment for years to come. Over the past two years, participating schools have decreased lunchtime trash by an average of 70%. Collectively, schools will divert thousands of bags of trash destined for landfills this year alone.

**WHERE DO YOU SEE GRADES OF GREEN GROWING FROM HERE?**

We're so proud of the great and green work of our 250,000+ Grades of Green students across the globe. These kids are creating change that affects entire communities, cities and beyond. At Grades of Green, our next big goal is to reach 5 million students. 5 million students is the estimated "tipping point" of the number of students needed to create an eco-mindset shift in the next generation.

ACES and Grades of Green both see environmental education as a necessity— a solution to the problems our planet faces. These problems often seem unapproachable, and too tremendous to face with optimism. How beautiful, though, that the next, emerging generation of global citizens is our hope. Loam is so grateful for programs like ACES and Grades of Green that are helping to cultivate ecologically conscious citizens, with an eye toward a sustainable way of life.

