



Bright Ideas for Connecting Youth and Sustainability

Mark Twain said, "There is no sadder sight than a young pessimist."

Local agencies throughout California are helping empower their community's youth to make a difference while learning about sustainability. These creative activities and the resulting interest from youth surely will reduce the number of young pessimists and would likely have met with Twain's hearty approval.

Involving a community's youth in local agency activities is not new; cities and counties have been doing this for years. What is relatively new, however, is the range of activities that help youth become involved in and understand issues related to sustainability. The suggestions presented here highlight ways to connect sustainability and youth and are drawn from participants in the sustainability and climate-change recognition program, the Beacon Award: Local Leadership Toward Solving Climate Change (www.ca-ilg.org/BeaconAward), as well as other communities.

Energy Efficiency and Alternative Energy

- Work with schools and nonprofits to provide students opportunities to learn about energy efficiency.
- Invite students to accompany agency public works staff in evaluating energy-efficiency retrofit options for agency buildings or invite student interns to work on agency energy projects.
- Involve youth in designing and retrofitting buildings, emphasizing energy efficiency and alternative energy-related opportunities. For example, the City of Benicia works with a local nonprofit that teaches students how to perform energy-efficiency and water-conservation assessments for community residents. And the City of Indio's Teen Center includes a solar photovoltaic system, thanks to recommendations from Indio's Youth Advisory Council.

Healthy Food

- Use vacant public land in an underserved neighborhood for a community garden where children and youth can grow fruits and vegetables, learn where produce comes from and have access to healthy food.
- Collaborate with schools, a local food bank or an after-school nonprofit group to support neighborhood gardens where community youth can volunteer.
- Invite youth groups to conduct "food audits" of local grocery stores as a way to educate them about healthy food options.

Library-Centered Activities

- Use the library as a central place for youth to learn about sustainability through books, lectures and other activities. For example, in 2011 the Sacramento Library's community book club, The Big Read/One Book Sacramento, featured Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. In related community events, participating youth from low-income areas in the city planted trees in their neighborhoods, with quotes from Mark Twain attached to the tree stakes. And Rancho Cucamonga's library features a Kill-A-Watt program that allows patrons to borrow a kilowatt meter to measure home energy use. The library's Going Green series teaches children about ecosystems and the environment. One such event featured an eco-magician and an environmentally themed puppet show.

Parks and Recreation

- Involve youth as volunteers to help keep parks clean.
- Offer after school "energy efficiency" camps at neighborhood centers or parks. For instance, the County of San Diego Department of Parks and Recreation, in partnership with San Diego Gas & Electric, offers the Energy Saving Adventures (ESA) program at two teen centers in Spring Valley and Lakeside. The ESA program teaches teens about the practices and principles of energy efficiency and sustainability through activities, field trips, outdoor adventures and community events. Designed to inspire San Diego youth to practice and promote energy-saving initiatives in their own homes and communities, the ESA program also teaches young people to be environmental stewards for future generations.

Community Planning

- Involve youth in conducting a "walk audit" of the community to identify opportunities for and barriers to walking and biking.
- Ask Planning Department staff to brief the agency's youth commission about local planning issues and challenges, especially those that affect youth, such as park-related topics and bicycle-route plans.
- Include youth in planning-related advisory committees, such as General Plan updates and climate, sustainability and energy action plans.
- Collaborate with schools, transit agencies and the county to develop "Safe Routes to School" programs, thus increasing safe biking and walking options for schoolchildren.

Plant a Tree

- Involve neighborhood youth in tree-planting programs, especially in underserved areas.
- Collaborate with local Arbor Day associations or tree-related organizations to involve local youth in education and tree-planting programs.

Climate Change

- Work with schools and nonprofits to involve youth in conducting agency and community greenhouse-gas inventories and identifying options to save energy and reduce greenhouse-gas emissions.
- Ask the agency's youth commission to identify options for adapting to the impacts on the community from climate change. For example, the cities of San Carlos and Manhattan Beach involved youth in developing their climate-action plans. And youth in the City of Fremont participated in a community event to prioritize recommendations from a green task force and signed pledges to reduce their own greenhouse-gas emissions.

Participatory Budgeting

- Invite youth to participate in the agency's budget-planning process to identify spending priorities important to them. For instance, youth involved in Vallejo's participatory budgeting process helped suggest budget priorities of interest to local youth, such as increasing the number of bike lanes, installing outdoor fitness equipment on the waterfront, resurfacing tennis courts, creating community gardens and improving local parks.

Waste and Recycling

- Partner with schools and waste haulers to educate youth about “reduce, reuse and recycle.” For example, RecycleWorks, a San Mateo County program, partners with other local agencies, schools, nonprofits and the waste industry to educate students about waste and recycling through the Green Star Schools program. And the City of La Mesa partners with a local nonprofit to make presentations to schools about pollution prevention and recycling.
- Implement a “trash-free lunch” challenge in local schools. Students often offer excellent suggestions. Along these lines, high-school students learning about sustainability in the City of Sunnyvale asked for additional trash cans on a route the students take back to school after buying lunch off-campus. The city complied, and litter along the route declined.

Empowering Through Education and Involvement

Author Pearl S. Buck observed, “The young do not know enough to be prudent, and therefore they attempt the impossible — and achieve it, generation after generation.” Involving youth in sustainability not only educates tomorrow's leaders and community members, it also empowers them to get involved and make a difference now and for future generation.

Programs and Activities Referenced in the Article

(If using a printed copy of this whitepaper, please go to www.ca-ilg.org/BrightIdeasYouthSustainability to access the links below.)

[Beacon Award: Local Leadership Toward Solving Climate Change](#)

Activities of selected Beacon Program participants:

- [Rancho Cucamonga](#)
- [Riverside](#)
- [La Mesa](#)
- [Glendale](#)
- [Benicia](#)
- [San Diego County](#)
- [Sacramento](#)
- [San Carlos](#)
- [Manhattan Beach](#)
- [San Diego County Energy Savings Adventures](#) (San Diego County)
- [The Big Read/One Book Program](#) (Sacramento Library)
- [Manhattan Beach: Involving the Public in Climate Action](#)
- [San Carlos: Involving the Public in Climate Action](#)

Related Institute for Local Government Publications and Resources

- [Sustainability Best Practices Framework](#)
- [Beacon Award Program Spotlight Award Winners](#)
- [Youth Engagement and Local Planning: Ideas for Youth Commissions](#)
- [Addressing Climate Change: Ideas for Youth Commissions](#)
- [Vallejo Participatory Budgeting Story](#)
- [Involving Youth in Your Agency's Sustainability Activities](#)
- [Today's Youth: Tomorrow's Green Workforce](#)
- [ILG's Engaging Youth Program Resources](#)
- [Safe Routes to Schools Online Toolkit](#)

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The Institute welcomes feedback on this resource:

- *Email:* yhunter@ca-ilg.org Subject: *Financing Energy Efficiency: Options and Issues to Consider*
- *Fax:* 916.444.7535
- *Mail:* 1400 K Street, Suite 205 ▪ Sacramento, CA ▪ 95814