

# Go Green School of the Week

## Old Settlers Elementary School

Flower Mound, Texas

Week of October 6, 2008

Monarch butterflies should put their wings together in a big round of applause for the students and families at Old Settlers Elementary School in Flower Mound, Texas.

The school's extensive butterfly garden is one of the many ways Old Settlers is going green.

"Right now in October, the monarchs are coming through here on their way to Mexico," explained Bonnie Carner, the PTA's former environmental chairperson. "The only thing they feed on is milkweed, so we always have milkweed growing."

Old Settlers, in a suburban community located smack dab between Dallas and Ft. Worth, established a garden several years ago, but it wasn't maintained well. Last year, students, staff and the PTA (Parent-Teacher Association) decided to give the weed-infested garden a makeover.

The garden grew from 16 planting boxes to 24. Students and staff researched how to create a butterfly garden, making sure the critters have something to eat whether they're creeping caterpillars or beautiful butterflies. An area with plants specifically for the crawlers is dubbed *Caterpillar Cafe*.

The butterfly garden is a popular resting place for monarchs as they migrate from northern regions to Mexico each fall.

"Once I started this job, I learned so much from the teachers about the monarchs," Carner said. "When the monarchs were coming through, my son and I looked up and thought, 'Holy cow! I can't believe how many monarchs there are!' It's fascinating. We have a monarch habitat at our house, too."

The butterfly garden is so well organized that it's been certified by Monarch Watch and the National Wildlife Federation.

While the butterfly garden is important, the school's vegetable garden is equally as significant. Nearly 300 of the school's 750 students planted vegetables last fall. Students got down and dirty to plant 120 spring-blooming bulbs, 120 pansies and 420 spring vegetable plants. Students enjoyed their bounty before school ended in June.

"When it comes time to pick, the kids go out to harvest and then take (the vegetables) home," Carner said proudly. "Some of the kids didn't even know carrots come out of the ground. They saw the green leaves on top, but they had no idea the carrot grew in the ground."

Students, staff and parents pitch in to help beautify the garden. There are fancy signs telling which vegetables were planted by which classes. Stepping stones have been placed carefully among plants. Students built toad houses.



The PTA sponsored an in-class composting program called *WormLab*, providing each teacher who wanted one a small compost bin and a full pound of squirming red wiggler worms.

"Some of the teachers were like, 'Are you kidding? Worms in our classroom?'" Carner said. "But then they saw that it wasn't dirty, and it didn't stink."

Students are encouraged to toss their banana peels or leftover lunch scraps into classroom compost bins.

A crayon recycling program had unintended benefits. Students were encouraged to bring old crayons to school. The bits and pieces would be mailed to a company that recycles crayons. In addition to broken crayons, the school ended up with 1,000 like-new crayons.

"They were not cracked. They had points on them," Carner said. "I thought, 'Why am I sending these to be recycled? They were perfectly good. We talked to the students, who mentioned some of the schools in the district that could use them.'"

The good crayons were sent to other schools with economical disadvantaged students.

Old Settlers stepped up its years-old recycling program last year with support from the PTA. The year-long effort was named "Our Stars, Our Planet, Our Future," a play on the school's Stars mascot.

The PTA made sure each classroom had recycling collection bins. The PTA also bought 10 50-gallon bins for collecting from classrooms. The contents of the larger bins are dumped into a huge recycling dumpster. Best of all, the work is done completely by students.

"The kids are a lot more aware of what you can and cannot recycle," technology teacher Gail Little said. "The kids empty the buckets into the dumpster. Every week, they say, 'Miss Little, somebody put a Kleenex in here' or 'Somebody put a snack wrapper in here.' They're a lot more responsible for their Earth."

One side effect of the expanded recycling program is campus tidiness.

"The school's cleaner," Little said. "It's *really* cleaner."

There were dozens of other go-green changes at Old Settlers. The school newsletter went from print to electronic, saving 4,700 pieces of paper each month. Teachers were urged to use both sides of paper for copies. Cell phones and sneakers were added to the recycling list. Teachers were encouraged to communicate with parents by e-mail instead of with paper notices.

Special needs teacher Paula Paterson came up with a creative way to recycle plastic water bottles. She filled them with colored water and glitter to make weights for the motor skills lab.

Little, adviser for the student council's Go Green Team, said the school will expand its go-green efforts this school year. They hope to encourage the lunch program provider, a private firm, to recycle. So far, they've talked the lunch staff into recycling cardboard boxes.



"People are talking about it," Carner said of the school's many go-green projects. "The word is spreading. People have come to look at our garden. It's beautiful out there. Our principal holds meetings out there."

"People want to know what they can do in their own schools," she said. "It's spreading through the community, which is really exciting."

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