



Illinois

Monroe Elementary School, Hinsdale, Ill.

Educating the caretakers of our earth

Monroe School is dedicated to preparing students to understand their role in the world and their responsibility in protecting it by reducing environmental impact, improving health and wellness, and internalizing environmental literacy.

Monroe has a decades-long commitment to environmental education through its "Living Classroom Learning Lab," now in its 23rd year. Right in their own schoolyard, Monroe has created a prairie, butterfly garden, Japanese garden, vegetable garden, pond, and bee habitat. Teachers, working with parent volunteers, help the students as they plant, weed, harvest, make observations, and write in the gardens. It is truly "hands-on" learning across the curriculum.

Living Classroom lessons focus on the interdependence between humans and nature and humans' responsibility to be good stewards of the environment. In 2017, Monroe added an observation bee-hive to further stimulate student investigation and support students' sense of curiosity. This year, through their study of pollination, the first grade class will be designing, acquiring funds for, and planting a hummingbird garden. All of these approaches contribute to the sustainability of local ecosystems.

The Living Classroom curriculum from kindergarten through third grade teaches the importance of the life cycle of every ecosystem by developing the concepts of producers, consumers, and decomposers. The students come to know that humans and animals have the same requirements to sustain life, and that both groups have nutritional needs that begin with plants. In the spring, kindergarten students plant the seeds of vegetables, and first grade students plant the seeds of flowers. Throughout the summer, students watch their plants grow into delicious vegetables and beautiful flowers. As some of the vegetables and flowers wither in the late fall, these same students will harvest the seeds of their plants, saving them to be planted in the spring. By experiencing the complete circle of life of an ecosystem, the students come to realize the necessity of caring for and sustaining each ecosystem. Fourth and fifth graders delve deeper into the study of ecosystems by observing and



researching the microscopic creatures that inhabit a pond. By developing the food chains and food webs contained in the pond, they understand the necessity of maintaining the need for biodiversity, which is a vital part of the well-being of the planet.

Monroe's Living Classroom extends beyond the school and into the greater community. The school has a special partnership with a neighbor, who helps with the upkeep of gardens and has provided tree donations. During the summer, many families take turns weeding and watering the grounds. Students educate neighbors and parents with literature about the need for biodiversity and the importance of pollinators to the environment and human health. At the end of summer, a vegetable, honey, and lemonade stand brings families and students back together to celebrate the harvest and connect before the start of the school year. In October, the vegetables planted by the kindergarteners and harvested by the first graders are donated to the local food pantry. Monroe continues this spirit of helping others by sharing compost with Chicago Public School gardens.

In addition, the school promotes health and wellness. Monroe kicks off the school year with a family five-kilometer run/walk in a nearby forest preserve. The administration encourages alternatives to driving to school via walk-to-school



Monroe Elementary's principal and bee mentor inspect the school's observation hive

challenges and a bike-to-school safety course. A morning running club called Monroe Milers supports over 200 students exercising before school. Students also participate in Jump Rope for Heart, a school operated Lift-a-Ton club, after-school yoga, and teacher-led movement breaks during class. Monroe's Illinois Blue Ribbon award-winning physical education department encourages outdoor fitness by holding approximately 50 percent of daily classes outside, including an annual sledding day. An all school field day culminates the yearlong emphasis on health and wellness. A

generous outdoor recess policy allows students a fresh-air opportunity anytime the temperature is over zero degrees. Finally, field trips often are planned to promote the outdoors. Fifth graders attend a three-day, two-night field trip at an outdoor educational camp to learn more about nature and unique environments, while kindergartners tap maple trees, and third graders learn about habitats at the Morton Arboretum.





To help reduce environmental impact, Monroe has a student green club that meets twice a month. They learn about recycling, upcycling, sustainability, and implement schoolwide programs. These include classroom green captains, a lunch-waste audit, and promoting zero-waste lunches. Batteries, holiday lights, and fluorescent lights are collected for proper recycling. Students help educate parents by making signs to not idle during pickup and dropoff. The green club ran a campaign to obtain a new tree for the school playground, during which all students voted on which type of oak tree to plant. Parent volunteers give environmental talks during the lunch hour. Monroe hosts an Earth Day upcycling collection, during which the school asks the community to bring in unused household goods and clothing for resale, keeping these items out of landfills. The monthly hot lunch program was modified to produce less waste in its packaging. Monroe has a green, paperless PTA, with online communications and registrations. Green yearbook practices earn the reward of having more trees being planted in the school's name. The school has water stations throughout the school for students to fill their own reusable water bottles, and has staff training on environmental issues. As a result of these efforts, Monroe is proud to have been awarded the Earth Flag and Water Flag from SCARCE, an environmental education nonprofit.

Monroe works to educate the community, and embody what it means to be green.

