

Iowa - FY2018 Green Ribbon School Honoree

Iowa

St. Columbkille Elementary School, Dubuque, Iowa

Long-term commitment to holistic environmental awareness

St. Columbkille Elementary is one of seven prekindergarten to 12th grade schools within the Holy Family Catholic School Systems in Dubuque, Iowa. With an urban population of approximately 300 prekindergarten through fifth grade students, the administration and staff has made a commitment not only to educating students on environmental topics, but maintaining an atmosphere that encourages respect and knowledge of the Earth. For over 10 years, the staff has implemented programs and lessons not limited to: recycling, composting, native and prairie plants, and the general reduction of waste. This long-term commitment has created an atmosphere of respect for the environment, and instilled the mindset that the small things individuals do can make a difference in the world.

The greatest example of St. Columbkille's dedication to environmental education is the extensive use of the property as a learning tool. The interest and care for the environment can be seen even before you walk in the school's front doors. A rain garden was constructed in 2013 with students and community members identifying what plants would be best for the purpose of the garden and how to design it effectively, all while learning the function and importance of a rain garden. The garden is appropriately placed at the end of the gym's rain spout system, and at the bottom of two small hills, which provides plenty of water for the rain garden plants to enjoy.

A short walk around the building will bring you to another prime example of using the land directly for environmental education. In 2009, a 50' x 80' section of land was planted as a native prairie plot. This area has a plethora of native prairie plants that are not only helpful to the land itself, but also are used as a versatile educational tool. Students learn how to identify native plants, about invasive species, biodiversity, habitats, ecosystems, prairie plants, insects, food webs, et cetera while visiting the prairie plot. Students are reminded of these lessons when they go



outside for recess throughout their day. In addition to the educational tool this plot provides, it is also ecologically beneficial as the plants soak up water runoff, and provide ample habitat for many small rodents, birds, and insects.

Dedication to respecting the health of the land can be seen when you look around the classrooms. Each room has a recycling bin which is collected and emptied weekly into the city's recycling dumpsters by the fourth grade class. The amount of waste that reaches the recycling bin is reduced at the source simply by reusing paper, using small whiteboards, and providing computers and online programs for school work and to communicate with members of the school community. The entire school also helps reduce the amount of waste entering the landfill by composting in the lunchroom. Each grade is educated on what can be composted, and students place their food scraps in separate bins at lunch. As the students learn about the



St. Columbkille uses its property extensively as a learning tool, including this native prairie plot

proper utilization of these services, they take this knowledge and practice to their households.

The physical well-being of St. Columbkille students is just as important to the staff as academics. Upon arrival, students walk around the gym area awaiting the morning

announcements. Throughout the day, students enjoy 20-30 minutes of recess outdoors on the

football sized yard, which includes a variety of play equipment, as well as a softball diamond and open areas to run. The students go outside for a variety of lessons when the weather permits.

In addition to physical well-being, St. Columbkille also is concerned for the mental and emotional well-being the students and staff. It is a Leader in Me school, and promotes leadership and forward thinking in students from the beginning of their education. This is implemented through direct lessons, as well as activities that guide students to become leaders of their peers and leaders in their own personal and academic goals.

Care for students' overall well-being also is shown through the opportunity for spiritual connection. As a Catholic school, St. Columbkille believes and instills in students that they are caretakers of our world. An outdoor space in front of the school is dedicated to spiritual growth. St. Columbkille recently freshened up a 20' x 40' prayer garden in which students, staff, and community members can sit outside, reflect, and take a moment of peace during a busy school day.



Caring for and respecting the environment begins at prekindergarten at St. Columbkille. Each grade has an environmental theme and focus that is encouraged throughout the school year. Prekindergarten starts its practices with a small outdoor classroom that they play in and maintain. Kindergarten learns about composting, then lessons move on to learning about animals and their needs in first grade. Second grade studies plants, and then energy conservation comes in third grade. Fourth grade tackles recycling, and evolves that knowledge to determining environmental solutions in fifth grade. All of these areas of study involve interactive classroom lessons, as well as field trips to community locations related to the subject.

The school is dedicated to making students aware of how the knowledge gained and behaviors learned within the walls of the school can be expanded to the outside world. St. Columbkille uses community connections through the city of Dubuque and surrounding areas to increase knowledge, as well as to encourage the community mindset that students' behaviors in the classroom affect the community they live in, and therefore, the world. Through the years, St. Columbkille has earned many 'patches' through the Dubuque Metropolitan Area Solid Waste Agency Green Vision Education Program. These measureable growth patches or badges show St. Columbkille's dedication to a variety of environmental practices, and include subjects ranging from a litter free campus, to eco-literacy and energy efficiency.

St. Columbkille is growing in commitment to the environment. Within the next calendar year, the school is revitalizing a backyard program involving the kindergarten class, which is creating a small garden for the early childhood center, improving accessibility of the prairie plot, incorporating more community connections to encourage a larger diversity of incoming knowledge, and increasing the sustainability of environmental education lessons in the classrooms.

The Dubuque community considers St. Columbkille a gold star example for carrying out holistic environmental awareness so extensively that the awareness turns into a mindset and culture. Members of the St. Columbkille community have created an atmosphere of dedication to Mother Earth in their behaviors, while increasing knowledge of the environment by using the outdoor spaces on the campus. All of these efforts are to instill a love and respect for the one world that we've been given, so that the world can be enjoyed now, and in the future.

