

Project 5: Educating the Public: Eco-Tech at University City High School, Philadelphia, PA

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Introduction

- Eco-Tech is a Small Learning Community (SLC) within University City High School, Philadelphia, PA emphasizing environmental studies and technology skills.
- Although it is often mistaken for a charter school, it can be considered a “chartered” program within the High School.
- Some students elect themselves for the program, but most of the student population is randomly selected from the district’s large pool of “average” students- there are roughly 100+ students in the program.

History

- The impetus behind EcoTech was the prevalence of nutrition-related diseases such as obesity, hypertension, and diabetes, and their impact on the West Philadelphia community.
- Note: only a portion of the students are from West Philly. Since the program is an SLC, it is open to any student in the school district who elects it, and the remaining students are pooled from the rest of the district.



Background

- Students spend half of their day in the EcoTech program. This allows for uninterrupted time to work on larger projects and gives the teachers extended time with the students.
- The remainder of the students' day is composed of a Math class, English, a language or a social studies class and a study hall.
- EcoTech students do not take gym, music, art, home-economics, industrial arts or other traditional enrichment classes.

Background, Continued

- There is a lot of volunteer involvement in the program. Some groups teamed with EcoTech include:
 - Urban Nutrition Initiative
 - Farm to City
 - University of Pennsylvania: M.Ed students, Environmental Studies students and GIS students from various disciplines.

Advantages

- By virtue of the student-run website, “phillyTURFtech.org,” students are aware of career options in the green sector: their website lists job links to environmental and community activism websites.
- The students are becoming ambassadors to the community- their student-managed farmers market makes their educational program more visible.





Disadvantages

- As only a small portion of the students choose the Eco-Tech program, the remainder of the student pool is chosen at random from the “average” tier of students in the Philadelphia school system. Student morale is incredibly low.
- The few motivated, more promising students, such as one I met who aspired to become an architect and had superior computer programming skills, encounter a lack of college/career counseling support and resources.

Disadvantages, continued

- Although students who happen to choose an environmentally-related college or career path, such as architecture, forestry or environmental studies- may find this program useful, the program does a poor of job of preparing the average student for post-secondary education, with such a limited foundation in the liberal arts.

Conclusions

- Emphasis on computer skills.
- Emphasis on environmental awareness.
- Social problems in the school district, and the school (i.e. teen pregnancy, truancy and lack of funding for textbooks and library materials) are undermining the effectiveness of the program.
- Program does not do a competent job of giving the students a well-rounded liberal education.



References

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Questions

- Thank you!

