



How **Green** Is My Town?

An Environmental Assessment
of Local Governments, School Systems
and Business Communities in
Westchester County, New York

*This program was created and developed by Grassroots
Environmental Education, a non-profit organization, and conducted
in Westchester County in cooperation with Pace University's
Academy for Applied Environmental Studies*

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Executive Summary

Background

Grassroots Environmental Education (“Grassroots”) is the developer of an online national environmental assessment tool, “How Green Is My Town?” (HGIMT) which consists of a set of criteria designed to reflect a community’s efforts to address issues related to climate change, sustainability and environmental health, together with policy and program solutions from non-profits and government agencies.

Using a set of questions based on the criteria, students from Pace University, assisted by Grassroots volunteers and staff, conducted in-person and telephone interviews with local government officials, school administrators and business leaders to determine the extent of their community’s success in addressing these issues. Interviews took place between November 2009 and March 2010.

Forty-five “towns” were identified in the county, based upon the definition of a town as a contiguous geographical area with a common school system. In this context, “towns” could be cities, towns, villages or unincorporated areas. Results from the interviews were tabulated by Grassroots. Scores were weighted; local governments were factored by six, school districts by three, local business communities by one.

With the exception of the local business communities, the response rate to the program was extremely high, with all local governments participating, and only five school districts failing to complete the survey.

Key Findings

The criteria contained in HGIMT represent a “wish list” of best practices and policies for towns and schools; not surprisingly, there were no perfect scores. However, the assessment shows a generally high awareness of the issues, with the average Westchester town or village government scoring 287 out of a possible 468 points, and the average school scoring 115 out of a possible 165 points.

Our most important finding was the fact that most towns and school districts lack an official, comprehensive environmental policy, and few towns have either an Office or Director of Environmental Affairs. As a result, efforts to address environmental issues are often fragmented and uncoordinated. Indeed, the towns with the highest scores tended to have one person in charge of environmental policies and practices, while those scoring lower required several people just to answer the survey questions.

One of the common themes in the HGIMT criteria is the requirement for a written policy, not just a compliant practice. This is because official policies have the force of law, and survive personnel changes, while good environmental practices can easily slip backward with changes in personnel. A high percentage of our respondents assured us they had good practices in place; we awarded only partial credit in these cases.

Another major challenge facing Westchester communities is the disturbing lack of participation by most business communities. We strongly urge town and village governments to engage their business communities in a dialogue about environmental responsibility, with the goal of having the business community assume their proper role as full partners in a green community.

Specific Recommendations

1. We recommend that **all town and village governments adopt a comprehensive environmental policy** that sets out its basic goals and implementation strategies. Such a policy provides a focus for the efforts of town employees, community groups, business organizations and individual residents. A sample policy is located on the program web site.
2. We recommend that **all school districts adopt a comprehensive environmental policy** that sets out the district's basic goals and implementation strategies, and importantly, recognizes the unique vulnerability of children to environmental toxins. A sample policy is located on the program web site.
3. **Green Procurement Policies** are essential for towns and schools; they set out the conditions under which products and services will be evaluated, and can be attached to all bids and RFPs. Sample policies are on the web site.
4. For both towns and schools we strongly recommend that **good practices** in energy-efficiency, purchasing, cleaning, construction, land management, transportation, water conservation, recycling, environmental toxins and communications be **codified in written policies**.
5. We urge towns and schools to centralize their environmental decision-making process by establishing a formal **Office or Director of Environmental Affairs**.

How Green Is My Town? Survey Methodology

The Selection of “Towns”

Residents of Westchester County often use the term “town” to describe the community in which they live, regardless of its municipal status. The place they live may in fact be a village, a city, or an unincorporated area within a town. For the purposes of our program, we have defined a “town” as a contiguous geographical area sharing a common school district. To identify these communities we have used the name most often associated with it (e.g., “Chappaqua”) regardless of whether it is an official designation or not.

The “towns” included in the evaluation of Westchester County were Ardsley, Armonk (Town of North Castle), Bedford, Briarcliff Manor, Bronxville, Buchanan, Chappaqua (Town of New Castle), Croton-On-Hudson, Dobbs Ferry, Eastchester, Edgemont (Town of Greenburgh), Elmsford, Harrison, Hartsdale (Town of Greenburgh), Hastings, Irvington, Katonah (Town of Bedford), Larchmont, Lewisboro, Mamaroneck, Mount Kisco, Mount Pleasant, Mount Vernon, New Rochelle, North Salem, Ossining, Peekskill, Pelham, Pleasantville, Pocantico Hills, Port Chester, Pound Ridge, Rye Brook, Rye, Scarsdale, Sleepy Hollow, Somers, Tarrytown, Tuckahoe, Valhalla, White Plains, Yonkers and Yorktown.

Non-Participants

We attempted multiple times over a period of three months to contact officials at towns and school districts, and to be responsive to their time constraints and availability. While we were pleased with the overall response to our program, we were disappointed that not everyone chose to participate.

The following school districts did not participate: Mount Vernon, Mount Pleasant, Ossining, Pocantico Hills, Tuckahoe and Valhalla.

The Criteria

"How Green Is My Town" is built on an extensive framework of green criteria developed with the assistance and participation of scores of government officials, school administrators, business leaders, scientists, physicians, researchers and activists who reviewed our criteria and contributed their time and energy to help steer the project along. The program is consistent with, and links to, many issue-specific environmental evaluation programs including the U. S. EPA, Department of Energy, ICLEI, USGBC and hundreds of others.

The Methodology

Using the criteria developed by Grassroots, students from Pace University interviewed local government, school and business leaders from their respective communities, recording their responses to the “yes” or “no” questions (with guidelines for awarding partial credit if warranted.) The results from the interviews were tabulated by Grassroots and shared with respondents to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the data.

Scores were weighted; local government results were factored by six (60% of score), school results were factored by three (30% of score), and business community results were factored by one (10% of score).

Key Statistics for Towns

Energy

- Of the 43 towns included in the survey, 72% reported having energy audits performed on all town-owned facilities.
- 44% reported having mandated energy reductions.
- 66% have investigated sustainable energy sources and utilized them where appropriate.
- Only 27 of the towns have mandated the installation of electronic thermostats in town buildings.
- 90% have replaced incandescent bulbs with energy efficient bulbs.

Green Procurement

- Only 14 out of the 43 towns reported having a comprehensive green purchasing policy.
- A majority of towns reported that they consider lifecycle energy costs, sustainability of materials, transportation and packaging costs, recyclability and health impacts when they purchase goods and services, although this was mostly by practice, not policy.
- 31 towns reported belonging to a local purchasing network, but few belonged to the growing list of green purchasing networks.

Green Cleaning

- Only 16% of towns reportedly prohibit the use of anti-bacterial products containing triclosan; many of the respondents were unaware of this chemical's potential dangers for the environment and human health.
- Less than one-third prohibit the use of artificial air fresheners in town facilities, despite evidence that these products can trigger asthma attacks in sensitive individuals.
- 28% use microfiber cloths for cleaning.

Sustainable Building

- 31 of the 43 towns mandate or encourage the construction of green buildings.
- 27 towns have a policy to encourage adaptive re-use over virgin development.
- 92% have a policy to preserve and protect open spaces.
- Fewer than half of towns provide special incentives for green buildings.
- 92% encourage mixed-use zoning.
- 30 towns mandate or encourage permeable paving for parking lots, roadways and walkways.

Land Management

- 64% of the towns have a policy to prohibit the use of turf pesticides on town land, including public parks.
- 28 towns operate a municipal composting facility.
- 91% have a tree planting program and a tree protection policy.
- Only 15 towns discourage the installation of synthetic turf fields.
- 24 towns provide space for community gardens.

Water Conservation

- 54% of Westchester towns have installed water-conserving plumbing fixtures in town buildings.
- 42% permit and encourage the construction of private greywater and rainwater systems.

Transportation

- Only 23% of Westchester towns provide preferred parking for electric vehicles.
- 57% have a policy mandating or encouraging the purchase of alternative fuel cell or hybrid vehicles.
- 82% provide bicycle paths, bicycle parking and walking paths.
- 84% reportedly impose and enforce a legal limit of idling of vehicles.
- 28 towns have enacted a “No-Idling” policy for all town-owned vehicles.

Recycling

- 100% of towns mandate the recycling of bottles, cans, cardboard and paper from town offices.
- 93% reported having a recycling program for batteries and e-waste.
- Only 19 towns provide a facility for the recycling of used goods.

Communications

- Of the 43 towns, only 16 have a formal Office or Director of Environmental Affairs.
- Only 17 towns require the use of green printing techniques for all documents
- 89% reported that they have a practical mechanism for communication of environmental policies to town residents.

ICLEI

- 25 of 43 towns are members of International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI), now known as ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability.

Key Statistics for School Districts

Energy

- Of the 37 Westchester school systems surveyed, 91% have had energy audits performed on all school facilities.
- 21 school systems have mandated energy reductions.
- 32 school systems have replaced incandescent bulbs with energy efficient bulbs.
- 72% have mandated the installation of electronic thermostats in schools.
- 22 school systems reported that they have investigated alternative energy sources and utilized them where appropriate.

Green Procurement

- 72% of the school districts reported that they consider the lifecycle energy costs over the lifetime of all items purchased.
- 59% consider the sustainability of all materials and ingredients in the products they purchase.
- 80% consider the recyclability of products purchased.
- 21 of 37 school systems consider the transportation and packaging costs attributed to the products they purchase.
- 33 of 37 belong to a local purchasing network.

Green Cleaning

- Thanks in part to a new law in New York State, 95% of school systems reported only using cleaning products that are safe for children.
- 62% prohibit the use of anti-bacterial products containing triclosan.
- 59% prohibit the use of artificial air fresheners in school facilities.
- 18 out of the 37 mandate the use of non-toxic hand wipes.
- 20 school systems use micro fiber cloths for cleaning.

Green Building

- 21 of the 37 school systems require new construction to meet green building specifications.

- 69% require renovations to meet green building standards.
- 22 of the 37 school systems utilize solar energy and natural daylighting in all new projects.
- 74% discourage the use of carpeting.
- 80% prohibit the installation of microwave towers on school property.

Transportation

- 91% of school districts prohibit the idling of school buses and other vehicles on school property.
- Only 12 out of 37 school systems encourage the purchase of (or contracting for) alternative fuel vehicles.
- 81% encourage walking, biking and car pools.

Grounds Maintenance

- 85% of school districts in Westchester have a policy to maintain grounds and playing fields naturally, without pesticides.
- 13 of 37 school systems discourage the installation of synthetic turf fields.
- 11 of 37 school systems use energy-efficient, non-polluting landscaping equipment.

Environmental Toxins

- 78% of school districts use only no- or low-VOC paints, and adhesives.
- 24 of 37 school systems encourage a fragrance-free environment.
- 89% perform floor care renovation only during vacation periods.
- 82% have an effective IPM policy for interior pesticides.

Recycling

- Only 11 of the 37 school systems compost food scraps from cafeterias.
- 30 collect and recycle batteries and e-waste.
- 88% include students in management of recycling programs.

Communications

- Of the 37 school systems interviewed, 72% provide curriculum in all grades on environmental issues.
- 25 school systems provide information on environmental issues on the school district website.