

Alvord Community School Goes Sustainable 2012

How I see it - Brian Skeele

A Sustainable Way of Life Becomes the Curriculum

Alvord School became the first sustainable community center school demonstration site in Santa Fe. Where enrollment had been dropping for years, Alvord is now the heart of a reinvigorated environment!

The entire community is experiencing a wide range of benefits that has occurred since the neighborhood residents, the city, local service providers, nearby businesses, the parents and students, the teachers, and the schools' administrations decided to work together to create mutually-beneficial facilities, truly a win-win-win.

Some of the many benefits to date include, job creation, an increase in revenues for the city, a pedestrian friendly lifestyle, safe streets for children to freely roam and play, huge jump in test scores, a much lowered dropout rate, a big increase in workforce housing, and a lowered consumptive, more affordable lifestyle that allows Santa Feans to live lighter on the planet, or as we say, a lifestyle that's good for people, good for the planet and good for the polar bears!

Kids and Neighbors are Mutual Beneficiaries

Not only is the curriculum drawing enthusiastic reviews in the pre K-8 grades, classroom facilities have been extended into the evenings, offering a lifelong learning environment to all ages.

Students of all ages are drawn to the hands on learning environment, where social, economic and ecological sustainable principles are taught and then practiced throughout the school and surrounding neighborhoods.

Alvord's social sustainability curriculum includes the "Alvord Grows Together" program, where students learn how to provide elder care, from running errands, such as walking a senior's dog, to helping them move into the Sage Cottage Cluster, where more assistance is available on a sliding scale. This affordable program is one example of many where students get practical self esteem building experiences as they find their place in the circle of life of the Alvord Community. Advanced classes give older students aging in place and assisted living care certification, both skills with jobs waiting around Santa Fe and the State.

Other life as curriculum classes include pre and early childhood development, relationship and emotional intelligence skills building programs, and working with the "homes to the homeless" program, where mobile citizens learn life and job skills, as they transition from the streets to homes throughout Santa Fe neighborhoods.

Food-Community, Connection, and Curriculum

Health, nutrition and cooking are all coordinated around the local agriculture program, "yards to farms". Gardening and dancing turned out to be keys to a much appreciated well-lived life.

The Alvord Kitchen has an expanded program that uses food to teach and create a more sustainable lifestyle. "Farms to Schools" and the "Yards to Farms" bring regionally grown food to the plate, increasing local food security while lowering the shipping distances. Children now have a personal connection with their food, as they regularly take working field trips to farms in the region and integrate class learning with hands on growing. Several homes and commercial facilities in the neighborhood

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have constructed attached greenhouses, so food production is a year around occurrence in the Alvord Community.

The Alvord Café and Bakery has transformed the former school kitchen into a great place to get good food. The facility is used around the clock, with the “Alvord Assembled Meals”, two different meal share plans, and the evening music scene, where kids and adults get together and have a lot of fun playing music. Culinary and baking skills are taught to all ages, and the meals feature local and regional organic produce, fruit and meats.

The Alvord Assembled Meals program is a profitable service offered to the community, especially appreciated by working parents. Parents get together at appointed times and put together wholesome meals for their families for the coming week. The meal share plans are another affordable service that have given great value to the community. Folks who have similar dietary preferences organize evening meals, taking turns shopping, cooking and cleanup, giving the others several nights “off” each week, and at the same time creating a natural sense of a mutually beneficial community.

Working Together to Get to Zero Carbon Emissions Lifestyle

The “Gone Green” Neighborhood Renovation program continues to transform energy inefficient homes into zero emission homes. The “Whole Home” audit documents the existing water and energy consumption of each home as well as the homeowner’s financial status, and comes up with a comprehensive plan that works for the owners as well as the surrounding neighbors. Single story homes often have been granted zoning variances to allow the neighborhood to go mixed use. Commercial and residential additions and resulting revenue streams are tailored to fit, ensuring a retirement plan that gives great comfort to each household. The local residents not only get to retire in familiar surroundings, but in many cases, their home’s equity is converted into their retirement funds, and the neighborhood gets a mixed use community.

The resulting walkable pedestrian friendly streets are alive and safe with neighbors out and about. Kids bicycle everywhere and families enjoy the affordability of viable one-car families. Mass transit, the train and car share services are affordably available to all and based on usage, are highly successful.

The Gone Green program has evolved into a local bank, where the neighborhood gets to invest in their community. Loans for solar hot water and electricity have transformed the neighborhoods utility bills. Alvord demonstrates and teaches classes on the latest energy and water saving devices and strategies. Neighborhood homes have wireless meters installed on all water and energy appliances and each home has a electronic screen readout, so all residents see their usage. Usage is way down, and neighbors meet regularly to brainstorm with students on what new strategies to implement next to reach their much anticipated goal of a zero carbon emissions lifestyle.

The School led the way, by planning and redesigning its water and energy systems. Water is captured, recycled and reused throughout the community. All the savings, including the district biomass heating system, have allowed the neighborhood’s population to grow, all without the need for any new water.

Recirculating pumps, and the biomass district heating, augmented with solar collectors have been an amazingly conservation program.

Four mini laundromats have been incorporated into the community. Parents and students can have a latte, read, or go shopping at the corner general store while their clothes are being washed in the

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conveniently located laundromats with state of the art highly efficient machines. Waste heat is used to heat attached greenhouses.

“If It’s Not Fun, It’s Not Sustainable”

Students of all ages have learned working together with the whole community, coming up with inspired ideas on how to live more affordably and lighter on the planet, is big fun. The north side of the Alvord had a community design day, and a recreation water slide was created utilizing the roof top of the 2-story addition. In the winter, a used snow making machine turns the water slide into “the Luge”, a great playground for everyone. The water park and snow playground are the source of countless opportunities for classroom curriculum, hands on everyday science.

Living machines demonstrate how bacteria and microorganisms purify water. The attached greenhouses provide essential composting, soil studies, and crop production opportunities. The solar recharged neighborhood electric cart collection service, gives teens an opportunity to make money and be cool, driving household food scraps to the community composting bins.

Locally Created Services and Products- the Emerging Sustainable Economy Emerges

As homes and business renovated into zero emission buildings and accompanying lifestyle, more space was created for residential, services and commercial usages. A network of used clothing store trades across town with other recycle stores, and the attached clothing repair shop teaches sewing and clothes design. Bicycle sales and repair, computer lab, graphics design shop and café, a library and bookstore, a woodshop and a metal shop, and an eBay store have all opened with help from the business incubator loan fund. Entrepreneurs of all ages are encouraged with micro loans, great business skills training programs, and affordable facilities to create products and services that evolve into locally created jobs. Mentors and apprentices of all ages share their love for learning and teaching. With the abundance of affordable housing, young adults can stay in their community, and the long traditions of Santa Fe’s cultures are sustained.

Video documentary labs and a sound stage have created a facility that beams the learning experiences of the entire community to the rest of the world. Turns out there is a large demand for information on how to sustainably live, and Alvord has led the way, across Santa Fe and New Mexico.

What we’ve learned is that an amazing abundance, a wealth beyond money, is available to all when a community works together to create a sustainable way of life where lifelong learning becomes a way of life, and life becomes the curriculum. The results? A lifestyle that’s good for people, good for the planet, and good for the polar bears!