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Chicago school going 'green' is expected to set national standard

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CHICAGO (CNS) -- A new kind of seed will sprout this spring at St. Monica Academy on Chicago's Northwest Side.

The school will roll out a curriculum built around environmental education called SEEDS, for Student Environmental Education and Development Studies, in hopes that it will not only take root at St. Monica but spread to Catholic schools across the Chicago Archdiocese.

The curriculum was designed by St. Monica faculty and staff from the Chicago Botanic Garden.

Anna Viertel, coordinator for school gardens at the Botanic Garden, said that "the really important thing is that we have the opportunity to design the curriculum" and "at the same time" plan how to design the campus itself to accommodate it.

St. Monica, which has students from pre-kindergarten to eight grade, has brought in Viertel several times so far to get its project going.

"When this is done, it will be the national standard," she told The Catholic New World, Chicago's archdiocesan newspaper.

The plan calls for at least two environmental units for each grade level, with each unit including components from several subject areas. The campus of the parish school has been designed with those units in mind, for example, with a butterfly garden for the kindergarten's study of the life cycle of a butterfly.

"In the younger grades, we want to get them outside as much as possible, and make them familiar with the mechanism of the natural world," Viertel said. "In the older grades we are building toward stewardship, responsibility and service projects."

The stewardship component has a natural tie to Catholic teaching, said the principal, Ray Coleman.

"It's a perfect connection for us, because we can include the messages of the faith," he said. "We have to be stewards of God's earth."

The plan earned the school the right to call itself an "academy" from the archdiocesan Office for Catholic Schools last summer. That title goes to schools that have a special expertise or emphasis.

"We really researched this for a whole school year," Coleman said. "We started planning in spring of '05, and researched the areas we could get into our curriculum."

After St. Monica staff finished writing it, the curriculum was turned over to the Chicago Botanic Garden's Center for Teaching and Learning for staff members' suggestions to be incorporated before being rolled out at the school.

It will take years to put the whole program in place, as the site is developed, Viertel said.

Some small projects are already under way; they include using worm composting bins in some classrooms and a recycling initiative led by the third grade.

A grant paid for the installation of six photovoltaic cells on the roof of the school last summer; the solar panels generate enough electricity to save an average of about \$20 a day on electricity.

The next phase is removing much of the asphalt and concrete on the campus and replacing it with either natural material or pervious paving, which will allow water to filter through to the ground instead of running off into the storm sewers.

A swath around the school building will be planted with low shrubs to keep heat and glare from paved surfaces from hitting the windows and heating up the building in the summer. Students already have bought into the program, enthusiastically recycling and composting food waste. Many of them are teaching their parents at home -- and sometimes even their teachers.

"In many ways, the adults have a lot more to learn from the kids," Coleman said, adding that the students will benefit from hands-on, practical projects.

Eventually, the effort will include greenhouses, student and community gardens, wind installations and comprehensive recycling and composting programs. An urban farm area will use organic, sustainable agriculture techniques, and a perennial growing area will feature edible native plants.

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