When you walk into Jacqueline Vaughn Occupational High School, you are immediately struck with a message: “Learn by doing.” This educational philosophy, made popular by John Dewey, touches every aspect of Vaughn High School’s curriculum. It is especially apparent in how teachers use environmental practices to teach life skills and job training.

For example, much of the school’s used paper doesn’t simply get tossed into the recycling dumpster. Instead, the students save and shred colored paper. They turn it into new, hand-crafted paper. There are plans to make stationery to sell, which teaches business skills and can be an additional source of revenue. Through paper-making the students also learn craftsmanship and innovative waste reduction.

Several classrooms practice worm composting. Students feed food scraps to worms, and the worms produce a nutrient-rich soil-like substance. The live worms provide a great teaching tool for math and biology. They also help reduce kitchen waste from Vaughn’s culinary classes.

Even items thought to be non-recyclable, like plastic soda bottle tops, are saved and will eventually become part of a mural.

This is all part of Vaughn’s overall environmental attitude, which extends beyond the classroom. The school’s building engineer mixes eco-friendly cleaning supplies in reusable containers. She uses floor cleaner packets that dissolve entirely in the water, packaging and all. Vaughn Occupational received a grant to become a Zero-Waste School, so these extra efforts really make a difference.

Little things, like using both sides of office paper or transforming old magazines into art, help keep the environment in students’ minds. However, Vaughn’s most impressive eco-feature is its garden. Funded with grants, and achieved through persistence and collaboration, the garden is used to grow flowers, herbs, and vegetables.

Students learn to care for plants and see for themselves the source of healthy foods. By building outdoor compost bins, they learn light carpentry, problem-solving, and teamwork. Even when the students’ fully blossomed sunflowers were destroyed, the dedicated teachers at Vaughn saw this as an educational opportunity.

And that is what makes Jacqueline Vaughn Occupational High School truly a special school. It seems the key to Vaughn’s environmental success is not solely in their efforts, but in their attitudes. The teachers and staff know that helping the planet and helping the students is one and the same. Not only can environmentalism be used to teach math and science; by creatively participating in planet-friendly practices, students learn patience, respect, hard work, foresight, and teamwork.

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