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## Success Story: The Power of Collaboration at George Washington Carver Middle School, Miami, Florida

***Bertha Vazquez, formerly of George Washington Carver Middle School, Miami, FL***

This is my story.

It all started in 2007 when a friend gave me a ticket to see former Vice President Al Gore speak at the University of Miami. He was presenting a screening of *An Inconvenient Truth*, his incredibly influential documentary about climate change (Guggenheim, 2006). It really hit me. I lost sleep.

The school where I taught for 33 years, George Washington Carver Middle School, sits just 8 feet above sea level; several of the surrounding neighborhoods are even lower. Miami is often cited as the city with the most to lose economically because of climate change, not just in the United States, but globally.

In 2007–2008, I asked my colleagues at Carver to join me in a schoolwide effort to show our students that change was possible. The results were astounding. I developed and conducted several initial workshops on energy-saving strategies and environmental curriculum with the principal's permission. The first step was building awareness and encouraging a sense of the school community. I included everyone, creating workshops for my school's faculty, cafeteria employees, custodial staff, students, and parent-teacher association.

Science teachers focused on basic climate science in their classes (e.g., units on energy and energy transfers, ecology, and meteorology). Students in other disciplines participated in engaging lessons, ranging from art installations to writing pen pal letters to children in other countries.

As a result of what the school community learned, we made several efforts to reduce our energy consumption:

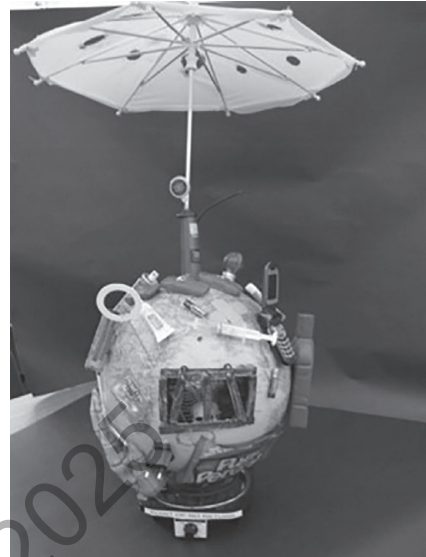
- Increased efforts to reduce and recycle. For example, the PTSA and school administration switched to digital communications to save paper.
- Swapped in energy-efficient light bulbs
- Added smart thermostats in the cafeteria and auditorium
- Added weather stripping around doors and windows
- Collaborated with a local business that donated labor and materials to paint a school roof white (which reflects heat and keeps buildings cooler)

Every department at Carver participated in our green efforts. For example, the art students created “trash monsters” out of the litter they found near the school (see Figure 1.11).

As a result of schoolwide initiatives, the school’s electric bill decreased by \$52,700 from September 2007 to September 2008. Our carbon emissions were reduced by 297,000 lbs., as calculated by Dream in Green (2008). This was an enormous accomplishment, and it was the beginning of continued work by the school community that goes on to this day.

And lest you think this work is thankless: The school community and I received enormous publicity around our achievements (leading to my opportunity to coauthor this book!). George Washington Carver’s successes were highlighted in the film series *Young Voices for the Planet*, written and produced by Lynne Cherry (2013).

**FIGURE 1.11 • A Trash Monster, Titled “Warming Earth.”**



Source: Alexandra Garcia

Photo Credit: Janas Byrd