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The Nueva School's Sustainability Efforts Lead to Green Achiever Award

As part of SMCOE's continuing series on San Mateo County Changemakers, we interviewed Sarah Koning, Director of Environmental Citizenship at [The Nueva School](#), to learn about their success with the California ([CA-GRS](#)) and Federal Green Ribbon Schools ([ED-GRS](#)) program. Nueva School was recognized at the highest level as a "Green Achiever" in April 2021, demonstrating its dedication and commitment to leadership as an environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient school.



Sarah is new to The Nueva School community and expressed gratitude for the collaboration and commitment of students and staff who made this award possible. In Sarah's words, "Everyone contributed to the answers and it was such a holistic experience for everyone involved." This Green Achiever recognition is being viewed by the school community as a benchmark to see where and how Nueva can continue to grow and improve. When Sarah joined Nueva School, she looked at sustainability through a lens of positivity and progress, recognizing the benefits that would come from receiving a Green Ribbon Award and identifying opportunities for more collaboration, growth, and environmental citizenship.

Read on for a summary of Sarah's responses to a number of interview questions.

What inspired you to apply for the Green Ribbon program and what was the process like?

Sarah has been inspired by Nueva's work in sustainability over the years and saw the Green Ribbon program as an opportunity to think collaboratively about the school's sustainability objectives. The program has also provided a roadmap for documenting past achievements and an opportunity to benchmark against external

standards. She commented that this structured inventory of practices in facilities, curriculum, and community programs accelerates the initiatives Nueva has already accomplished and inspires them to try new strategies.

The application process was a truly collaborative approach. Faculty, staff, and students from every grade level were involved in the application process. Sarah explained that collaboration is common at Nueva, so transferring that approach to the Green Ribbon application was natural.

How has the Green Ribbon process led to change within the Nueva school community?

The Nueva School has a long history of commitments to sustainability, and the Green Ribbon program was a chance to highlight past, present, and future efforts. Sarah shared that the process and recognition brought about mutual awareness and improved interaction between their two campus communities.

Sarah went on to say that Nueva can now use this benchmark data in all the focus areas to help identify their next steps. For example, The Nueva School has designed four overarching goals to incorporate into their community and curriculum: creating a mindset of environmental citizenship, moving toward nature, developing systems thinking, and designing and evaluating solutions. These goals will incorporate specific objectives that work with student voices, from more robust outdoor spaces, integration of environmental justice, and improvement in waste management.

Would you recommend other schools to use Green Ribbon for benchmarking?

“Yes! We highly recommend it.” While Sarah acknowledges that applying for the Green Ribbon program is a lot of work, she also believes it is a goldmine of information to help schools make decisions that will save time and money in the long run. For example,

Nueva is now able to access energy metrics, which is critical to implementing its four sustainability goals. In closing, Sarah shared that the “Green Ribbon Program will help a school community understand all the really amazing work that is already happening in your organization. Many find that they are doing more than they realize... The Green Ribbon program is a time to acknowledge and celebrate that – and then use that progress to look towards the future.”

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“It is a wonderful way to gather information together and see where your institution stands and then once you have that information it is a gold mine to help you make decisions in the future.. We all here highly recommend that organizations participate in it and go through the process. It is really engaging and can help your organization understand all the really amazing work that is happening on campus.”