

San Mateo County School Changemaker Interview

Green Ribbon: South Hillsborough School

Hillsborough City School District - Spring 2021

For our continuing series on change-makers in San Mateo County, we interviewed three of the leaders at South Hillsborough School – Principal Lina Butte and teachers Erin Bautista and Sally James – to discuss their [California Green Ribbon Schools \(CA-GRS\) silver-level recognition](#) and sustainability efforts at their school. Sustainability at South Hillsborough (South) is truly a collaborative process and these three represent a cross-section of those involved.

Principal Butte has been with the Hillsborough City School District for about 14 years. When she became the principal at South about three years ago, she was excited and inspired to learn about the incredible green culture and initiatives that already existed. She was honored to support Erin and Sally's ongoing professional development and leadership in environmental education.



Erin Bautista has been at South for eight years and in the district for 15 years. She is currently the Innovation Lab teacher leading students through collaborative engineering and design projects involving real-world problems and solutions. She began incorporating environmental issues and solutionary thinking a few years ago and has built on this success ever since. The students have identified and worked on problems such as waste, litter, creating and maintaining a healthy creek ecosystem, and more. Erin feels the [Solutionary Teacher Fellowship Program](#) (formerly SMELC) provides excellent training to create a unit of instruction, with input from peers and high-quality Problem-Based Learning training.

Sally James currently teaches third grade at South but has been a part of the South community for over two decades, serving as the teacher/librarian for over a decade and volunteering countless hours as a parent. She loves the unique location of the campus suspended over the San Mateo Creek and the beauty surrounding the students and staff all the time. Her interest in environmental education began with recycling and working in the garden with the Green Ambassadors Program more than 15 years ago. A few years ago, Sally learned the San Mateo County Office of Education was a leader in Environmental Sustainability Education (ESE), so she joined its Community of Practice where she learned about other districts' efforts and brought new ideas to South. She also joined the [Solutionary Teacher Fellowship Program](#) (formerly SMELC) focusing on Zero Waste, hoping it would resonate with her third-grade students and help them understand the importance of reusing, recycling, and properly sorting waste.

Below is a summary of their collective responses to a number of interview questions. Watch the video version of their interview [here](#).

What inspired them to apply for the CA-GRS program? What are some key takeaways from the process?

Principal Butte applied for the Green Ribbon recognition to honor Sally and Erin's work and how much they inspire other teachers (even during COVID-19). They agreed they would like to align district and site initiatives and inspire other schools to promote green initiatives and sustainability. By capturing the benchmark data, they could evaluate and capture their work to protect and celebrate their stunningly beautiful campus, the wild animals, and the natural environment for the students. Sally and Erin both praised Principal Butte's willingness to listen throughout the process.

Describe the process/approach that South Hillsborough took in completing the application? Who was involved?

Completing the CA-GRS application was definitely a collaborative effort. Principal Butte met with Andra Yeghoian from ELSI to get an overview of the process and familiarize herself with some of the initiatives that should be included. Superintendent Louann Carlomagno was very supportive, encouraging, and receptive in offering her help and connecting the GRS team to others. Retired Assistant Superintendent Larry Raffo, Supervisor Maintenance and Grounds Ron Russo, and Custodian Ariel Cornejo provided important information about the plants, facilities, and other technical aspects of the campus. As the custodian, Ariel is essential in several ongoing sustainability efforts such as lunchroom operations, sorting waste, eliminating plastic bottles, and weighing the compost. The entire staff thinks deliberately with a green lens.



What is next for your school in the journey in sustainability?

After the important benchmarking process, Principal Butte realizes that they have much to celebrate. She also recognizes that they are “not done and have a lot of work ahead of [them].” The South team would like to thank the students, teachers, parents, and staff for the desire, inspiration, and momentum for many initiatives: changes in the menu provided by Choice Lunch, field trips changes, installing water filling stations (inspired by student

Daniel Laws, who wrote a grant for the first filling station which eventually led to the installation of filling stations at all the school sites in the district!). In fact, the students are incredible and were the early implementers in sustainability. They are going home and teaching their parents. The parent community is on board to reduce waste during classroom and school events. Fourth and fifth-grade students complete service learning projects involving research and volunteer hours. Teachers report a shift to more environmentally focused organizations. The team would like to add students becoming stewards of the earth to the Essential Outcomes at the district level to prompt all K-8 teachers to add this as a priority in their instruction.

Sally wants to continue working with the Town of Hillsborough and the police department to help more kids bike/walk to school safely. They would start the day with exercise, which benefits learning and health but also helps reduce carbon emissions. However, the roads in Hillsborough are narrow with no bike lanes and poor visibility. She hopes collaboration with other agencies will allow more students to walk/bike safely. She also hopes to inspire individual teachers to integrate environmental sustainability into existing lessons.

Erin hopes to continue her focus on food waste, saying, “Lunchroom waste does not feel necessary. It feels solvable, though not easy.” She would also like to continue reducing plastics on campus. She recognizes the importance of sorting to remove plastics from landfills, but since a large percentage of the country’s recycling is not purchased, she would like to increase efficiency by shifting the focus to consumption and manufacturing. We need to [precycle](#) when we make our purchasing decisions.

Principal Butte agrees with Sally and Erin but would like to add a focus on master planning of campuses at a higher level: understanding and planning centered on green building, including solar panels and fans.

Would you recommend other school districts use the CA-GRS for benchmarking?

The South team found this to be a very rewarding experience. Erin says getting students involved in what is happening is key because they have great influence - “Give students decision-making power!” Sally’s message to teachers is, “It is going to be easier than you think! It is worth the time to change your way of thinking for your whole life and expand your classroom environment and potential. Every teacher has the chance to make this change now.” Principal Butte feels students are the future, so it is important to build more sustainable habits now. She adds, “Don’t be afraid to get your administrators involved! Share the work that is happening.”

**“Give students
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