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'Messy Town' Teaches Students About Clean Water

An initiative by Rutgers University and the School and Home Association will add a rain garden to the school.

By [Eileen Oldfield](#) | [Email the author](#) | April 18, 2011

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Messy town, students at Woods Road Elementary School learned last week, has a problem.

Farm waste, too much fertilizer, trucks leaking fluids, litter and other waste made the town's—actually a model representatives from Rutgers University presented to students—turned the town's water systems into a mire of tossed-away sludge.

"What can you do about the waste from the farm getting in the water," Amy Boyajian, program associate from the Rutgers University Water Resources Program, asked a group of first graders about one of the town's problems.

"Call 911," one of the students cried excitedly.

Though the answer involved putting a fence around the animal pasture rather than calling emergency services, the students' ideas provided a segue into the project the school will complete after spring break: installing a rain garden on the school property.

The garden will be planted after students return from spring break, since rainy weather prevented the school and Rutgers University representatives from planting it before break. The school's Green Committee, which is part of its School and Home Association, has been working on the project since last year.

"We met with Rutgers last year but we didn't have the money," Laura D'Andrade, the committee chairman, said. "This year, we started getting it together. We created our proposal, got approvals from facilities and met with facilities to scope out areas."

The garden, once installed, will include several varieties of native plants and will be located outside the school's Transitional Primary classroom.

The messy town demonstration, which Boyajian presented with Program Associate Jillian Thompsen and Program Coordinator Sara Mellor, is a precursor to the planting days. The model uses sprinkles, chocolate powder and other edible substance to let students to see how pollution and every day life affects an ecosystem. It also allows them to introduce the rain garden concept to students and explain how the plants prevent waste from entering the water.

"It's not necessarily a hard thing (to think about)," Boyajian said. "It's just getting them to realize pollution is real and there are solutions to it."

"There are lots of questions regarding what is a rain garden," D'Andrade said. "By the end, we are hoping they understand it's a way to filter the water. They really seem to click with the demo."

Though the Rutgers representatives and parents will plant the garden, the students' excitement extends beyond waiting for its completion.

"The kids want to participate," D'Andrade said. "Ideally, we would have them go out and plant, but we're not able to."

"What we really want to see is a rain garden in everybody's yard," Boyajian said. "Hopefully, they get excited about it and tell their parents."

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