

Although young students are showing interest in obtaining an environmental education, it may be difficult to add sufficient room into the New Haven Public School system curriculum. Matt Wilcox, director of the medical library at Quinnipiac University and New Haven Public School System board member, says he has noticed that an eco-friendly-focused lesson plan can often get buried in the K-12 public school system. "It's hard to put new things in the curriculum. But I also think a lot of this stuff [a focus on environmental education] is already in the curriculum because things like this permeate society in thinking. It may or may not be easy to pull out where it already is in the curriculum," says Wilcox.

While Wilcox agrees that k-12 schools should emphasize the importance of environmental education, he cites two reasons why it's become a challenge to incorporate it into the already established curriculum. "The two things I see are one, it's hard to put new things in and the second is the assumption that it's not there. It might be there, but there's a lot of other things," says Wilcox. Teachers are always looking for ideas and lessons to incorporate into their classrooms, but Wilcox says one of the challenges of adding more environmental education is how it's meeting the state guideline and how it fits into the larger curriculum package. "Replace this lesson with this lesson and now you're checking the environmental science box," he says.

In addition to the growing concern for climate change, Wilcox says it's essential because students themselves want it. "We've had students that are specifically asking that we have these types of things in the curriculum related to environmental sciences and climate sciences," he says. "We get periodic calls that this is more of an issue than highlighted in the curriculum, and in the way school does it business."

As a board member, Wilcox is involved with a food service task force and has noticed that one of the ways students show interest in environmental education is through studying food waste.

“[At a board meeting] we talked briefly about some of the student interest in food waste, recycling food waste, and the environmental impact,” says Wilcox. “That was an area of interest in the past. Before COVID hit, we talked about reaching out to Yale to do the food recycling program and getting that started in the [New Haven Public School] district.”

Although the food recycling program was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Wilcox has observed that many k-12 schools in the New Haven Public School district do not prioritize environmental education because “there’s just not enough time, money or people. In the New Haven area, the Common Ground School is an area where the majority of people are interested in these related subjects,” he says. “In other schools, there may be 100 great ideas, but you have the time or bandwidth to do one thing.”

One thing Wilcox would like to see more schools doing is tying infrastructure and the business of the k-12 schools into education. “Any typical school might have a lot of space on the roof where one could put solar panels. We have parking lots and we have roofs. There probably could be some funding in place to help us put those in,” he says. “We do it in some areas. We’ve gone through and done LED lighting projects.” Wilcox says that although the school is taking steps to be more environmentally conscious, they are missing opportunities to teach children about why these steps are important.

“The key piece that I think is missing is how can you turn that into instruction?” says Wilcox. “Let’s just say this summer, they go through School A and replace all the lights with LED lighting fixtures. ‘How much money is that going to save?’ That’s a math problem. ‘A fixture costs X number of dollars uses this much energy, your electric bill will go down this much.’ That’s a relevant problem that scales not just to a whole school, but to someone’s home,” he says.