

AMY BELDOTTI

In a world increasingly sculpted by environmental challenges, fostering a sense of environmental stewardship in our youth is more important than ever. As chief academic officer for Stamford Public Schools (SPS), I believe integrating hands-on environmental education into our curriculum is necessary for preparing students to become informed citizens and future leaders. SPS is fortunate to have an incredible partnership with Stamford-based SoundWaters, the state's leading provider of climate science education, especially when it comes to learning about Long Island Sound.

At SoundWaters, education is not confined to classrooms and textbooks but can take place in the sand, in the salt marsh and out on the Sound. Our kids aren't just learning about marine life, they're experiencing it firsthand. They're pulling up nets teeming with creatures, analyzing water samples, and even canoeing the very waters they're studying. This is the experience that our students in first-, third and sixth grade have as they visit Cove Island Park and the Coastal Education Center. In content aligned to the Next Generation Science Standards, our students are engaged in activities with SoundWaters staff to learn about our local brackish water ecosystem, food webs, habitat diversity, climate change and sustainability.

Then last fall, my secondary curriculum team proposed the idea of an integrated science course for ninth graders to stimulate their interest in a self-selected science pathway. As they were working on the content, I received an email from Leigh Shemitz, president of SoundWaters, asking if her team could come and pitch us an idea — perhaps we would want to partner with them to engage high school students in conducting a scientific study of a salt marsh in Stamford Harbor. The long-term ecological goal would be to restore the salt marsh, remove invasive and counterproductive plant

Lessons in environment bring students outdoors



Tyler Sizemore/Hearst Connecticut Media

SoundWaters Assistant Director of High School Programs Tim Abbott and Extracurricular Program Coordinator Katie Boback speak about the marine life at the salt marsh at the SoundWaters Harbor Site at Boccuzzi Park in Stamford.

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species and replace them with native plants to restore animal habitats, thereby improving water quality and enhancing shoreline resiliency. They had us at "engage high school students" because we knew this opportunity would perfectly align with the new course we were designing for SPS ninth-graders. I am extremely proud to say that every SPS ninth-grade student will visit SoundWaters starting in April to begin this exciting exploration.

We are living in a time when environmental challenges are no longer a distant concern — they are an immediate reality. From rising sea levels to declining biodiversity, the next generation will face unprecedented environmental issues. To help them navigate these challenges, we must equip students with the knowledge, skills and mindset needed to confront them. Hands-on

environmental education provides the tools they need to understand these issues and take meaningful action. It helps them develop scientific literacy, problem-solving abilities and ethical perspectives that will empower them to be informed, engaged citizens who can address the pressing environmental challenges of tomorrow.

One of the most powerful aspects of hands-on environmental education is that it can create a lifelong passion for environmental advocacy. By providing students with these direct experiences in nature, we help them develop a sense of wonder and respect for the world around them. As they observe the beauty of the salt marsh ecosystem and witness the impact of their efforts to restore it, students are likely to develop an appreciation for the environment that lasts long after their field trip ends.

The salt marsh restoration project in Stamford is an excellent example of what environmental education should look like in the 21st century. It blends academic learning with real-world application, promotes collaboration and critical thinking and encourages students to take ownership of both their education and the environment. By integrating hands-on environmental projects into the curriculum, we are not just teaching students about the environment — we are giving them the tools to protect it.

I want to thank SoundWaters for the important role they play in supporting science education. They not only provide these memorable experiences but in doing so inspire a love for the ocean, foster a sense of wonder and cultivate responsible environmental stewards. I look forward to our continued partnership and new ways to bring enriching opportunities like this to our students.

Amy Beldotti is chief academic officer for Stamford Public Schools.