

SUSTAINABILITY HERO

December 2022



Jenna Kostovski

Music Teacher and Sustainability Lead
First Avenue Elementary School (Essex County)

For over ten years, Jenna Kostovski has served as the music teacher at [First Avenue School](#), a pre-K through eighth grade school located in the North Ward section of the city of Newark. A natural leader with a knack for building partnerships, Jenna was asked to head the school's green team in 2020. Under her leadership, the school achieved Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification at the silver-level; First Avenue School is one of only four schools in Essex County that have accomplished this. The sustainability program at First Avenue School benefits from the active participation and encouragement from Principal Rosa Branco and a group of talented staff and students.

In 2022, New Jersey's First Lady Tammy Murphy visited First Avenue School to see first-hand how the school is incorporating sustainability and climate change into the curriculum. Jenna explained, "At First Avenue School, being sustainable and taking care of our planet is a source of pride for our students and staff. Our kids take energy efficiency seriously because they understand the impact they are making. Implementing the sustainable actions has made our school better because of the improvements, but just as importantly, our community is stronger because we are proud of what we accomplished together."

First Avenue School completed sustainability actions that totaled an impressive 500 certification points. To review the complete sustainability program, visit the [2022 Sustainable Jersey for Schools Certification Report of First Avenue Elementary School](#).

Jenna's ability to combine resources and good ideas became evident in her first year at First Avenue School. In 2017, Jenna established a band program with old instruments that were found in the building. She applied for and received a [Save The Music Foundation](#) grant that funded new instruments for the student ensemble, which then grew to 65 members. Jenna said, "For some of the students, many of whom face challenges at home and in school, arts education and expression not only gives them an area to shine and grow, but also reinforces things they are learning in other classes."

In 2019, internationally renowned pianist Lang Lang and the [Lang Lang International Music Foundation](#) joined students at First Avenue School to celebrate the opening of a new Keys of Inspiration piano lab. Jenna helped secure this grant and approximately \$50,000 in funds to the school's programs over the years.



Student Sustainability Ambassadors Present at Green Fair: On June 2, 2022, the First Avenue School held its inaugural green fair. The Student Sustainability Ambassadors showcased their projects that spanned a variety of focus areas including energy, waste, climate change and health and wellness. Pre-kindergarten students used recyclable materials to make flowers and bugs; first graders discussed how to turn disposable household items into something new and useable; second graders created wind turbines that turn wind into energy and middle school students made paper.



The students did a practice green fair for an impressive guest to the school; New Jersey's First Lady Tammy Murphy visited the school to see first-hand how the school is incorporating sustainability and climate change into the curriculum. First graders Allyson, Thiago and Angelina discussed the recycled art projects on their table for visitors. They explained, "Earth is our planet. We can't go live on another one so we have to take care of it." Second graders Chris and Daniel expertly described the benefits of wind turbines. They said that making and learning about wind turbines made school more interesting and fun. Over 15 projects from each grade level were on display with students staffing the tables to discuss the work. First Avenue School received 10 points toward their Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification by completing the action [Green Fair](#).



EmPowered Schools Program: Jenna led First Avenue School's participation in the 2021-2022 [EmPowered Schools Program](#). The school was one of 11 schools in PSE&G service territory that participated in the program, which provides free support and resources to educate students in saving energy and money in their schools and homes. In K-12 educational facilities, student engagement is key to accessing behavior-based energy savings. The EmPowered Schools program educates students about energy efficiency through a project-based curriculum while saving energy in schools and building pathways to green jobs. Students become ambassadors for energy conservation in the classroom and at home. First Avenue School is participating again in the 2022-2023 EmPowered Schools Program.



Knight Riders After School Cycling Program: To promote a healthy lifestyle in school, First Avenue School, led by teacher LeVar Harris, developed an after school cycling program called the Knight Riders that teaches bicycle safety and provides students with the knowledge and skills to improve their lifestyle through cycling. Using the [New Jersey BikeSchool curriculum](#), students learn various bike safety skills, including wearing a helmet, bicycle care and signaling. Each student was provided with their own bicycle and helmet. Students practice their bicycle safety skills and are encouraged to do the same when biking at home or to school. In addition, [EZ Ride](#), one of eight Transportation Management Associations for the state of New Jersey's Department of Transportation, did an on-bike training to teach students safety skills and rules and the benefits of cycling. For this program, First Avenue School received 10 points toward their Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification for completing the action: [Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety and Promotion Initiatives](#). Building on this program, Jenna said the green team is working on [School Travel Plan for Biking and Walking](#) action. This effort that will map out how to improve pedestrian and bicycle travel to and from school in order to increase the number of students who walk and bike to school and improve safety. Jenna noted, "Our bicycle safety work is a good example of how the [Sustainable Jersey for Schools actions](#) provide a framework for things we want to do but may not have had a path forward for how to get it done."

School Gardens and Outdoor Classroom: With the help of Argentina Aquino, a parent liaison at First Avenue School, gardens were planted around the school grounds and in raised garden beds. Students conducted research on ways to grow produce and compost at home. Their self-reflections and ideas were then used in the development of the school's gardens. The school partnered with [JerseyCares](#) to find volunteers from the community who helped place the raised garden beds to ensure proper sunlight. They also helped prepare soil to plant vegetables in the ground. The produce, soil and tools were donated by organizations such as [NJ Snap-Ed](#) (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education) and the school staff. Jenna said, "We began to grow herbs, such as cilantro, mint and rosemary. Students assisted in the planting process and continued to tend to the gardens ensuring that they were properly watered and taken care of. In our prepared soil, we planted larger produce, such as lettuce, peppers and tomatoes. We monitored the growth and shared an end of year report with our school community. Our herbs grew so well in our raised garden beds, that we began trimming them to distribute to staff in our building." The school recycled shipping pallets to create colorful benches that serve as an outdoor classroom and seating area for the garden. First Avenue School received 10 points toward their Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification by completing the action [School Gardens](#).



School Culture and Climate Needs Assessment: During the COVID-19 pandemic when teaching was on-line, First Avenue School completed a school climate assessment survey to assess students' social and emotional needs. A positive school culture and climate is integral to students' academic success and their social, emotional and physical well-being. Doing a comprehensive school culture and climate assessment is the critical first step in school improvement efforts. After the assessment, a plan to address the issues raised was created. For this work, First Avenue School received 20 points with completion of the action: [School Culture and Climate Needs Assessment](#). As a result of this study, First Avenue School improved its Social Emotional Learning Integrated Unit that focuses on building self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship and responsible decision-making skills. Students studied these skills in a variety of performing arts classes, with social emotional learning competencies aligned with each lesson. To assess student progress, data was collected through Google Forms and discussions via chat in virtual classes with Flipgrid. At the end of the unit, students demonstrated skills in their prospective art form such as dance, drama or music. First Avenue School received 10 points toward their Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification by completing the action [Social Emotional Learning Integrated Unit](#).

Education & Experience: Jenna received an MA in Educational Leadership from Montclair State University and a BA in Music Education from William Paterson University. Through the program [Teach for America](#), Jenna started her career as a teacher of music at the Roseville Community Charter School in Newark and then served as a teacher of music for Thomas Edison Energysmart Charter School in Somerset. In 2017, Jenna accepted the teacher of music position at First Avenue School. As the Artistic Director of Visual and Performing Arts for First Avenue School, Jenna works with various departments to develop school showcase events and the annual school musical. In addition to teaching, Jenna directed the Knights After School Academy where she developed an extracurricular educational program with a focus on both academic and social emotional learning for K-8 students. Jenna oversaw the addition of a Bilingual After School Program that catered specifically to the school's English Language Learners. Jenna was a Grammy Educator Award nominee in 2019 and the Teacher of the Year for Newark Public Schools in 2018.

More About Jenna: Jenna grew up in Monmouth County, New Jersey with her parents and brother. Jenna's mother was a teacher in New Jersey for 30 years. She also incorporated music into her classroom, playing guitar and piano. Jenna said she is lucky to have grown up in a family that encouraged and valued her participation in the arts. Jenna was classically trained in flute, in addition to singing in choirs. Jenna lives with her husband Christopher in Bergen County. In her free time, she enjoys cooking and spending time with her large extended family.