

# SUSTAINABILITY HERO

## July 2022



### Carolyn McGrath

Sustainability Leader, Hopewell Valley Regional School District  
Teacher of Visual Arts, Central High School (Mercer County)

Carolyn McGrath is a teacher of visual arts at [Hopewell Valley Central High School](#) and a highly regarded sustainability leader in the [Hopewell Valley Regional School District](#). For over 18 years, Carolyn has been an environmental club advisor working with students on issues such as recycling, composting, waste reduction and more recently--climate change. She is a co-facilitator of the Hopewell Valley Regional School District Green Team, a lead organizer of Hopewell Valley Green Week and a Board Member for [OASIS](#) (Organizing Action for Sustainability in Schools). Hard working and passionate, Carolyn is focused on bringing together students, teachers, administrators, parents and community members to work towards greater district and community sustainability.

“I’m very proud of the work we are doing in Hopewell Valley through our district and school-based green teams. We have demonstrated the ability to take on challenging environmental issues and follow through with meaningful action,” Carolyn said. “This is important because our students understand what is at stake; they are ready for us to address the climate crisis head on. As adults, we can’t just hand over the problem. It’s our job to work side by side with young people to create a better future for everyone.”

Carolyn played an important role in helping Central High School achieve bronze-level certification ([Certification Report of Central High School](#)) with *Sustainable Jersey for Schools* as part of a district-wide effort, led by former District Superintendent Dr. Thomas Smith, to achieve certification for all six Hopewell Valley schools. She was also instrumental in her school and district’s certification as [River-Friendly](#) through the [Watershed Institute](#). The Hopewell Valley School District is the first district in New Jersey to gain River-Friendly certification in all schools.

Carolyn served as the teacher mentor to the Hopewell Valley Central High School team that received first place in the 2022 [New Jersey Student Climate Challenge](#) state-wide contest. Her student team authored a [28-page Climate Action Proposal](#) for the Hopewell Valley School District that addresses clean energy, clean transportation, sustainable food use, sustainable school grounds and more.

Carolyn explained, “When we think about the changes necessary to address the climate crisis, we realize that these changes are better, not only for life on earth, but also for humankind. I’m optimistic about what the future could look like if we chose to live differently on this planet together.”



## First Place (High School Team Category) in the NJ Student Climate Challenge:

The [New Jersey Student Climate Challenge](#) encourages public middle and high school students to identify and complete a school or community project to address a cause or impact of climate change and create a short digital story video to share what they have accomplished.



The Challenge is designed for students to participate through their school with a teacher or club advisor as a mentor so their projects can be linked to their school learning experiences. Carolyn served as a teacher mentor for the Hopewell Valley Central High School Youth Environmental Society Team, which was the first-place winner in the high school category.

Since presenting their Climate Action Proposal to the Hopewell Valley Board of Education in March 2022, the students have been working to get the plan adopted by the district. Dr. Rosetta Treece, Superintendent of Schools for Hopewell Valley Regional School District said, “The amount of research the students put into the proposal was very impressive. We look forward to future collaborations together.” Watch the Central High School team [video](#). The school received a \$2,500 grant that can be used for future sustainability-focused projects.

**Curriculum Development for New Jersey Climate Change Education Hub:** In June 2020, New Jersey became the first state in the nation to incorporate K-12 climate change education across content areas when the State Board of Education adopted the [2020 New Jersey Student Learning Standards](#). The [New Jersey Climate Change Education Hub](#) is an online portal that connects educators to the resources they need to integrate climate change into their curriculum for all subject areas and grade levels. Working with [SubjectToClimate](#), Carolyn created the art climate curriculum for middle to high school students that is provided for teachers to use. She created four lesson plans: 1) [The Art of Climate Change](#), 2) [Art and Climate Action \(Climate Heroes #1\)](#), 3) [Youth Climate Action \(Climate Heroes #2\)](#) and 4) [Youth Climate Hero Portraits \(Climate Heroes #3\)](#). The Hub was created as part of the New Jersey Climate Change Education Initiative; a coalition of non-profit and higher education institutions including Sustainable Jersey, New Jersey School Boards Association, The College of New Jersey School of Education, New Jersey Audubon and the National Wildlife Federation.

**Hopewell Valley Green Week:** Carolyn is a lead organizer for [Hopewell Valley Green Week](#), which includes a series of district, school and community-based activities centered around environmental challenges and solutions. She explained, “Our goal for Hopewell Valley Green Week is to enrich and support the already robust environmental work being done in our schools, our towns and our region.” The 2022 Green Week’s keynote speaker was Harriet Shugarman, executive director of [ClimateMama](#) and author of *How to Talk to Your Kids About Climate Change: Turning Angst Into Action*. Carolyn said, “The connections, conversations and learning that takes place during green week deepens our commitment to working together towards environmentally just and sustainable solutions and provides opportunities for continued dialogue and action.” The 2022 Hopewell Valley Green Week took place in April; recordings of select events can be found on the [HVGreen Week YouTube Channel](#).



**District-wide Programs for Waste Reduction:** Carolyn’s environmental work in Hopewell Valley School District began in 2004 when she collaborated with a group of students and administrators to develop a building-wide recycling program. The Hopewell Valley Central High School Recycling Club was launched, and continued for many years, with Carolyn supervising students in paper and bottle recycling collection programs. In 2008, Carolyn worked with a group of students from the club on their application for the Lexus Eco Challenge, which they won. The grant allowed the Recycling Club to set up a composting program at the high school as well as at all other district schools. The grant money also facilitated the purchase of several filtered water refilling stations at the high school. Subsequently, Carolyn and her students initiated campaigns to reduce and eliminate single use plastic water bottles.

When Thomas Quinn, the Hopewell Valley Regional School District Director of Facilities, joined the district, the recycling and composting programs that Carolyn had worked to develop were formalized district wide. Subsequently, the Recycling Club, was able to shift its focus. Carolyn worked with a student to design consistent signage for recycling, compost and landfill bins, which would be used first at the high school and then throughout the district. She also worked with student artists to develop a “Green Guide to School Events” and a “Guide to Zero Waste Lunches.” Other projects included PSAs created in collaboration with the high school’s TV Production classes that educated staff and students about issues such as waste reduction, composting and plastic pollution. Carolyn and her students hosted a multi-year utensil sale to promote reusable over disposable plastic cutlery.



In 2020, Carolyn organized a public screening of *The Story of Plastic* documentary and facilitated a panel discussion with local environmental leaders. That same year, Carolyn spearheaded an initiative with her district green team to set up zero waste event kits in all the Hopewell Valley schools. The green team applied for, and was awarded, two grants from the [Sustainable Jersey Grants Program](#) funded by the [PSEG Foundation](#) in order to establish this program. Although the pandemic made initial implementation challenging, the Hopewell Valley schools now use these kits to host low and zero waste school events.

The Re-Imagine Club merged with the longstanding Youth Environmental Society in 2021 with Carolyn taking on the advisory role. The club has hosted hikes at local nature preserves, participated in Clean Communities Day and developed the Climate Action Proposal for the Hopewell Valley School District. Students from the club hope to participate in the district’s development of a Climate Action Plan.

**Education and Experience:** Carolyn has been a visual arts educator in the Hopewell Valley Regional School District since 1998 when she began teaching at Timberlane Middle School. Soon after, she started working at Hopewell Central High School, where she continues to work today. Carolyn is the longtime advisor of the Hopewell Central High School Photography Club and the advisor of Spectrum, Central High School’s gender and sexuality alliance. In 2021, Carolyn was the recipient of the Governor’s Educator of the Year Award for Hopewell Valley Central High School. Carolyn has a Master of Fine Arts from Maine College of Art and a Post-Baccalaureate Certification in Arts Education from the Parsons School of Design. She graduated Summa Cum Laude from Rutgers University and holds bachelor’s degrees in Visual Art, English and Psychology. Carolyn previously worked in the mental health field before becoming an educator.

**More About Carolyn:** Carolyn was born in Brooklyn, New York and grew up in Midland Park, New Jersey. As a child, she spent her summers in the Catskills at the home of her German immigrant grandparents. She said, “The many hours I spent there growing vegetables in the garden or going on long walks in the woods heightened my creativity and strengthened my connection to nature.” Carolyn said she began writing poetry about her experiences and continues to enjoy writing about her relationship to the natural world today. She was recently invited by [Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space](#) Executive Director Lisa Wolff to write a column that was featured in the Nature in the Valley series in a local publication.



Carolyn lives in Pennington, New Jersey, where she enjoys vegetable gardening and transitioning her home’s landscape to include native plants. When possible, she gets involved in community projects. Most recently, Carolyn created an [ArtSpire](#), which transformed a felled ash tree into a native bee abode. It brought in one of the top auction bids for the [Hopewell Valley Arts Council](#) fundraiser. Carolyn continues to make and show art in a variety of media, including drawing, photography, sculpture and video. Her artwork has been exhibited locally at Mercer County Community College, Rutgers University, The Phillips Mill and The Princeton Arts Council as well as in the galleries at the Maine College of Art and Kent State University. Her documentary, *Contested Territory*, which is about suburban sprawl, affordable housing and the environment, won best documentary in the U.S. Super 8 Film and Digital Video Festival and has been screened across the United States. Carolyn is also a past recipient of the Geraldine R. Dodge Fellowship for artists/teachers.