

Sustainability Hero

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Caroline Mann

Teacher and District Green Team Coordinator

Clinton Township School District; Hunterdon County, New Jersey

Caroline Mann is a teacher at [Round Valley School](#) and the District Green Team Coordinator for the [Clinton Township School District](#). Honored as the 2025-2026 Hunterdon County Teacher of the Year, Caroline is a leader known for building meaningful partnerships across classrooms, schools, and the broader community—always with the goal of creating a school environment where every student feels seen, valued, and empowered. Caroline is a standout sustainability hero who is creating a model for what schools across New Jersey and beyond should strive to replicate.

Tenacious in focus and fueled by optimism, Caroline is the spark behind a talented and dedicated group of educators and staff in the Clinton Township School District, inspiring the next generation of environmental leaders through hands-on learning opportunities. The Clinton Township School District Green Team maintains a [dedicated webpage](#) to update the community on their activities, including initiatives such as the Winter Sowing Project led by teacher and the Round Valley Garden Coordinator, Jennifer Desjadon. After collecting more than 400 milk cartons, students will transform them into mini greenhouses, bringing sustainability concepts to life.

Caroline balances life as an educator, community member, and mother of three. While she has many accomplishments—including climbing Half Dome in Yosemite National Park, completing 37 half marathons as part of the Half Fanatic Club, volunteering for more than a decade as an Emergency Medical Technician, and supporting the Boy and Girl Scouts—she is clear about what matters most: “My greatest achievement is creating a classroom where every student feels seen, valued, and respected.”

Under Caroline’s leadership, all four schools in the district have achieved [Sustainable Jersey for Schools](#) certification, with Round Valley School earning silver-level certification

(Read the [2025 Certification Report](#)). Her work reflects a core belief that sustainability is not an add-on to education, but a framework for helping students understand why their learning matters. “Sustainability is a good way to teach why things matter,” Caroline says. “It gives purpose to what the kids are learning in the classroom. Sustainable Jersey for Schools helps us think out of the box with what we are doing in our schools.”

This philosophy was exemplified through a \$2,000 [Sustainable Jersey Grant](#) funded by the New Jersey Education Association, which supported an innovative approach to clearing brush around the outdoor garden and transforming it into a learning space for students. Rather than relying on traditional clearing methods, Caroline brought in rented goats as an environmentally friendly alternative. She is thankful for the support of Mario Caballero of the [Clinton Township Environmental Commission](#), who mentored her through the Sustainable Jersey certification actions, and Director and Curriculum and Grants Carl Blanchard, who handled the grant application process. Sustainable Jersey grant applications are being accepted through March 9, 2026: [Sustainable Jersey Grants funded by The PSEG Foundation](#).

Teaching the “Why”: Caroline’s teaching philosophy centers on connection, inclusion, and real-world relevance. She designs learning experiences that meet a wide spectrum of student needs—from multi-sensory learners to advanced students—while maintaining a shared focus on problem-solving and application. Although she has experienced debilitating health challenges over the past two years, she channels her strength and resilience into



empathy and understanding for her students. She said, “I tell my students that your progress is ok. We are not all the same. It is our diversity that makes us strong.”

Whether teaching math, English Language Arts, or science-infused engineering projects, she emphasizes curiosity and learning from mistakes. Her classroom reflects this. At the beginning of each year, the walls are blank. By June, they are filled with candid photos of students actively learning—documenting the process, not just the outcome. “The why is the cornerstone of my teaching,” Caroline explains. “When students see how their learning connects to the world around them, they internalize it.” She adds, “Sustainable Jersey for Schools helps make the curriculum engaging. The actions create inclusive opportunities and serve as vehicles for students from a wide range of learners to participate.”

Learning Through the Natural World: Ronda Ferri, Round Valley School Dean of Student Supports and a third-grade special education teacher, first introduced Caroline to the idea of raising animals in the classroom by keeping chickens with her students. Although Caroline was not initially a bird lover, Ronda encouraged her to observe the process and witness the impact on student engagement.

Inspired, Caroline launched a butterfly sanctuary where students hatch eggs, raise caterpillars, observe butterflies flying freely in the classroom, and ultimately release them while learning about migration. She later adopted two Madagascar hissing cockroaches in need of a home, which quickly became classroom favorites—especially for a student with social needs for whom caring for the animals helped build confidence and connection with peers.

During the pollinator unit, students read and write about monarchs while actively raising them, documenting growth, and learning about habitats. “There is something truly magical about having free-flying butterflies in the classroom all day,” she said. “I’ve also led a hands-on initiative incubating chicken eggs—giving students learning experiences rooted in responsibility and care.”

In 2024, Caroline supported a student-led effort to secure funding for a school chicken coop. Students successfully petitioned school administrators, leading to the construction and ongoing care of the coop in the school courtyard. Students in small-group classes became the primary caregivers, serving as experts on the animals’ needs and modeling responsibility and leadership for the entire school community.

Caroline describes a defining “aha” moment when she realized the sustainability initiatives were truly taking hold. Walking down the hallway on a rainy day, she looked out into the courtyard and saw school leaders enthusiastically unpacking and assembling the chicken coop that had just been delivered. “In the Clinton Township School District, we’re lucky to be given the freedom to be creative and try innovative teaching,” Caroline said. “That’s thanks to the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Melissa Stager, Round Valley School Principal Mary Postma, and Director of Curriculum and Grants Carl Blanchard. We have a real sense of community, and everyone is contributing to and supporting these initiatives.”

In addition to these living-systems initiatives, Adriana King—a middle school teacher who supports English Language Learning in three district schools and serves as the District TerraCycle Coordinator—advances sustainability efforts across the district through her leadership in the TerraCycle Recycling Program, which promotes environmental responsibility by collecting and recycling hard-to-recycle items.

Air Quality Awareness Initiatives: One of Caroline’s favorite district-wide initiatives has been the air quality awareness actions. After green team members observed long periods of vehicle idling during school drop-off and pick-up, they partnered with the Clinton Township Police Department, the Clinton Township Environmental Commission, and the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to design an anti-idling campaign.

With support from DEP, students conducted baseline data collection, created signage, developed lessons, and produced video announcements that were shared across the district. During parent-teacher



conferences, schools displayed informational tables with anti-idling pledges, collecting nearly 100 signatures. The superintendent's newsletter prompted an additional 63 online pledge signatures. Students distributed informational "tickets"—an approach Caroline describes as effective because it was non-threatening. "The kids took the lead," she said. "When the message came from students, it changed the tone completely."

The effort culminated in the [Clinton Township Board of Education](#) passing an Anti-Idling Resolution and [Outdoor Air Quality Regulation](#), and installing state-provided signage at all schools. The initiative resulted in a documented reduction in idling across district buildings. Shifting from a focus on air quality monitors, Caroline is now working on the implementation of the Environmental Protection Agency's [Air Quality Flag Program](#), helping students understand daily air quality conditions while teaching them how environmental policy is created and adopted.

Reducing Food Waste: At Round Valley Elementary School, Caroline and Ronda, the Green Team Food Waste Reduction Coordinator, helped transform food waste reduction into a student-led movement with district-wide impact. It began with a simple question from students in Round Valley School's Waste Warriors Club: "Where is all this food going?" The answer? Straight into the trash—but not for long. Armed with clipboards, the Waste Warriors conducted their first cafeteria waste audit in winter 2024, sorting and weighing discarded food—from unopened yogurt cups to untouched vegetables.

They measured over 200 pounds of cafeteria waste in one day, including 30 pounds of spaghetti and pizza, along with uneaten apples and oranges. These findings galvanized the students and their teachers into action. The Waste Warriors brought their message into classrooms, teaching peers about food waste and sustainability. They promoted saving and sharing unopened items through the school's share table, creating visual materials and lunchtime announcements to raise awareness. Food service and custodial staff received a training to clarify what items could go on the share table and to explore small changes like offering whole fruits or switching from hot to cold vegetables. The adjustments will make it easier for students to save or share food rather than waste it. Read more about this effort in the New Jersey School Leader: [How NJ Schools are Tackling Food Waste-One Tray at a Time.](#)



Caroline is a frequent speaker, presenting the district's food waste reduction work and other actions; she presented with [Sustainable Jersey for Schools at the 2025 New Jersey School Boards Association Workshop](#), the Alliance for New Jersey Environmental Education conference, Future Educators Day at Centenary University, and the Council for Exceptional Children in New Jersey.

Rooted in Community: Caroline credits her parents as the greatest influence on her path to becoming a teacher. Her father, a civil engineer, nurtured her love of the natural world and showed her how classroom learning connects to real life. Through backpacking trips, outdoor adventures, and time spent on local trails and at the lake, he demonstrated that science, math, and problem-solving exist beyond textbooks. Caroline spent much of her childhood outdoors, attending Appalachian Trail Conservancy events and learning through exploration. Growing up, her family had trail names inspired by The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show—hers was "Sweet Nell," and her father was "Bullwinkle." Her mother, a librarian and lifelong reader, instilled a love of inquiry—encouraging her to question assumptions and resist settling for easy or surface-level answers. Together, her parents emphasized that learning is a journey, not a pursuit of grades.



Caroline holds a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Education from the University of Delaware. She began her career at the Delaware Autism Program, working first as a paraprofessional and then as a teacher, before joining the Clinton Township School District in 2005.

Outside the classroom, Caroline's love of the outdoors continues. Although she did not love camping as a child, she now embraces it, creating outdoor adventures with her growing family, alongside her fiancé, Ryan, and daughter, Peyton. Caroline is the proud mother of three children—Andrew, Natalie, and Julian. A lifelong believer in service, Caroline lives by a simple principle: "Community needs to take care of community." Through her teaching and commitment to others, Caroline exemplifies how education rooted in compassion and sustainability can leave a legacy that builds competence and hope for a better tomorrow.