

April 2026



Michael Atzbi, Ph.D.

**Supervisor of Science; District Green Team Chair
Woodbridge Township School District; Middlesex County**

When Dr. Michael Atzbi talks about sustainability, he doesn't start with policies or programs—he starts with responsibility. As both an educator and a father, he sees sustainability as a daily commitment to the future. A lifelong New Jersey resident, Michael began his career as a science teacher at Union High School before moving into leadership roles in the [Woodbridge Township School District](#). He currently serves as the Supervisor of Science, Health, and Physical Education, and is also a part-time lecturer at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education.

In 2023, Michael was tasked with leading the district's green team. At the time, he was relatively new to the Sustainable Jersey for Schools program. But rather than seeing that as a barrier, he embraced it as an opportunity. "I had a lot to learn," he says, "but I like to learn, so it was a great experience to lead the green team."

He quickly set out to build a structure that could support districtwide success. Recognizing the importance of representation, he recruited team members from every school—bringing together teachers, administrators, support staff, and community partners. This inclusive approach ensured that sustainability efforts reflected the needs and strengths of each school while aligning with a shared district vision. The result was more than a committee—it was a network. "The district green team serves as the driving force behind our collective sustainability efforts," Michael explains. The meetings themselves became a reflection of that culture. "They're fun," he says. "We're working together, bouncing ideas off each other, and the momentum of certification makes us all want to do more."

That mindset has helped guide an ambitious sustainability effort. Under Michael's leadership, all 24 schools in the Woodbridge Township School District achieved [Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification](#), with 11 schools earning [Digital Schools Star recognition](#). It's an accomplishment that reflects not only scale, but also coordination and a culture shift across an entire district.

Michael's path to sustainability leadership is rooted in curiosity. As a child, science made sense to him—it offered a way to understand how things work and why they matter. That curiosity evolved into a career in education, where he has consistently focused on helping students ask questions, seek evidence, and discover answers. That same problem-solving mindset now shapes his leadership style. Colleagues describe him as solutions-oriented and persistent—someone who doesn't just launch initiatives but ensures they are built to last. He embraces what he calls a "sustainable approach to sustainability"—carefully considering how programs will be maintained, funded, and scaled over five, ten, or even fifteen years. It's a philosophy that has proven critical in a district as large and complex as Woodbridge Township.

Turning Complexity into Clarity: Coordinating sustainability efforts across 24 schools is no small feat. The Sustainable Jersey for Schools program includes a wide range of actions, documentation requirements, and timelines. For many districts, this complexity can be a barrier to participation. Michael approached it as a systems challenge. He developed a centralized database of actions and "playbooks" that schools could use to replicate successful initiatives. If one school



completed a project—whether it was an energy audit, a recycling program, or a digital learning initiative—others could follow a clear roadmap to implement it themselves. This approach did two critical things: it reduced duplication of effort and accelerated progress across the district. In addition, the district has received over \$45,750 in funding from the [Sustainable Jersey Grants Program](#) since 2019.

He also worked closely with each school to identify existing programs that could qualify for Sustainable Jersey actions. By recognizing and documenting work already underway, the district was able to build momentum quickly while validating the efforts of teachers and staff. At the same time, Michael strengthened partnerships with township officials, aligning school-based initiatives with broader community sustainability goals. Woodbridge Township is certified with Sustainable Jersey at the silver-level and has achieved the Sustainability Champion Award for large-size municipalities 13 times. The collaboration with [Greenable Woodbridge](#) ensured that efforts extended beyond school walls and contributed to a larger, shared vision for Woodbridge Township.

Mapping Community Assets: One of the district’s innovative projects under Michael’s leadership is the Woodbridge Township Schools [Community Asset Map](#). Developed using ArcGIS, the interactive map highlights key resources throughout the community, including schools, parks, emergency services, community gardens, EV charging stations, and more. The map is an educational tool, allowing students and teachers to explore their community in new ways. It also reinforces the idea that sustainability is interconnected—linking environmental, social, and civic systems. Completion of the [School Community Asset Mapping](#) action by the district resulted in certification points for each school.

Advancing Digital Learning: A major milestone for the district has been the achievement of [Digital Schools Star](#) recognition at 11 schools—a complex, districtwide effort that required coordination across departments and grade levels. Digital learning, as Michael describes it, is about more than technology. It’s about preparing students for a rapidly evolving world. “Pursuing Digital Schools Star recognition encourages school personnel at all levels and in all departments to work together to improve planning, decision making, curriculum, budgeting, and technology resources,” he explains.



Under his leadership, the district implemented a comprehensive approach to digital learning that includes expanding access to devices and internet connectivity, including providing hot spots to ensure equitable access at home; integrating digital tools such as Google Classroom into everyday instruction; teaching students to evaluate information sources and develop digital literacy skills; and, enhancing communication with families through platforms like the Genesis online gradebook.

At the district level, Michael secured 85 certification points by completing the Sustainable Jersey for Schools actions: [District Commitment to Digital Learning](#); [Community Engagement](#); [Digital Citizenship](#); [Data Safety and Security Policy](#); [Digital Device Life Cycle Management](#); [Infrastructure](#); and [Support for Digital Teaching and Learning](#). These district-level achievements, combined with school-based Digital Star actions, enabled participating schools to earn Digital Star recognition.

Empowering Students Through Energy Conservation: While district-level coordination is essential, some of the most impactful sustainability efforts in Woodbridge Township are happening at the classroom level. At Avenel Middle School ([Certification Report](#)), a program has taken shape through the “Energy Avengers,” a student-led group that promotes energy efficiency across the school. Through monitoring, feedback, and creative messaging, students have helped shift daily habits and reduce energy waste. By engaging students directly, the district is not only reducing its environmental impact—it is cultivating lifelong habits and leadership skills.



At Colonia Middle School ([Certification Report](#)), students are leading a behavior-based energy conservation program through the [EmPowered Schools](#) initiative. After learning about energy use, students conducted audits of classrooms—measuring lighting levels, appliance energy consumption, and room temperatures. They then translated their findings into action—educating staff, creating awareness campaigns, and launching a schoolwide competition to encourage energy-saving behaviors. The results were immediate and measurable. “Colonia Middle School saved about \$5,000 in just a month,” Michael notes. Both schools completed the [Behavior-Based Energy Conservation Programs](#) action as part of their certification.



Creating Inclusive Outdoor Learning Spaces: At Colonia Middle School, sustainability takes the form of a therapeutic horticultural garden—a space designed to support both environmental education and student well-being. Supported by a \$10,000 [Sustainable Jersey Grant](#) funded by the PSEG Foundation, the project transformed an underused courtyard into a vibrant, accessible outdoor classroom. Features include native plantings, butterfly habitats, shaded seating areas, and a calming water feature.

The space was intentionally designed to serve all students, including those with disabilities. It provides opportunities for hands-on learning, sensory engagement, and social interaction, while also supporting mental health and cognitive development. Teachers are now using the garden for interdisciplinary lessons in biology, environmental science, and nutrition. At the same time, the space offers a peaceful retreat where students can connect with nature. More than 600 people have already been impacted by the project—a testament to its value as both an educational and community resource. Colonia Middle School earned certification points by completing the [Outdoor Classroom](#) action.



Reducing Waste, Supporting Communities: Sustainability in Woodbridge Township also extends to waste reduction and social responsibility. Across the district, food waste is collected and diverted from landfills through a partnership with the township recycling center. In a single year, more than 184,000 pounds of food waste were redirected to facilities that convert it into renewable energy. At the same time, schools are addressing food insecurity through creative, student-driven programs. At Menlo Park Terrace Elementary School ([Certification Report](#)), initiatives like “Soup for the Super Bowl” and the WE FEED MPT19 share table and food pantry program provide food to families in need while teaching students about empathy and resourcefulness (Watch the [Greenable Woodbridge segment](#)). A mini food pantry—open 24/7—ensures that support is always accessible. “These programs are teaching valuable lessons in sustainability and kindness,” Michael says. The school achieved points by completing the actions: [Civic & Stewardship Volunteer Initiatives](#); [Food Recovery - Share Tables & Donation](#); and [Food Waste Recycling or Composting](#).

Small Actions, Big Impact: Not all sustainability efforts require large-scale infrastructure. At all the schools in the district, a simple idea—recycling used crayons—has turned into a meaningful initiative with national impact. Through a partnership with [The Crayon Initiative](#), students and staff have collected and donated over 1,000 pounds of crayons, which are melted down and redistributed to children in hospitals. The program combines environmental stewardship with community service, showing students how small actions can make a difference. It’s also a reflection of Michael’s leadership style: empowering others to take initiative and turn ideas into action. At the same time, he leads by example—personally transporting boxes of collected crayons in the back of his car to the drop-off site, ensuring the effort comes full circle. Four of the schools in Woodbridge Township School District received certification points for completing the action: [Recycling Non-Mandated Materials](#).

More about Michael: Michael received his undergraduate and doctorate at Rutgers University. Michael’s academic research has focused on school finance and access to advanced STEM courses for students of color—an interest that continues to inform his work. Outside of school, he is a husband, father of three, and little league coach. He enjoys spending time outdoors and surfing at the Jersey Shore when time permits.