

October 2026



Nicole Sauer

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Through her leadership and ability to inspire others, Nicole Sauer has helped turn [Cape May City Elementary School's](#) sustainability goals into meaningful action while encouraging students, staff, and families to take part. Nicole has been an educator in the school community for 12 years and currently serves as a special education teacher and advisor to the Green Team, Earth Club, and Yearbook Committee.

Her dedication to sustainability goes beyond environmental stewardship. Through hands-on projects and student-driven learning, she helps young people become thoughtful, engaged leaders who can make a difference in their school and community. "The best part of my day is when I get to take the kids outside and they can get their hands in the dirt and their heads out of their screens," Nicole said.



Many students at Cape May City Elementary School have parents who serve in the Coast Guard, and approximately 70% of the school's students live at the nearby United States Coast Guard Base. Nicole shares that connection. Her father served in the Coast Guard, and she attended Cape May City Elementary School herself. Her path to leading the school's sustainability work was influenced by a former teacher. Past Sustainable Jersey [Sustainability Hero Sandy Sandmeyer-Bryan](#) taught Nicole as a student and, years later, became her colleague and mentor. In 2021, Sandy encouraged Nicole to take over leadership of the green team, continuing a tradition of sustainability leadership that Nicole is now helping pass along to another generation of students.

Small School, Big Commitment

As the only school in the Cape May City School District, Cape May City Elementary has demonstrated a longstanding commitment to Sustainable Jersey for Schools. After earning bronze-level certification in its first year participating in the program, the school has maintained silver-level certification since 2016, most recently renewing its silver certification in August 2026 with 375 points.

Maintaining that level of certification is a significant undertaking for a small school and green team. Nicole has been a driving force behind that progress. She serves as the school's designated Sustainable Jersey for Schools contact, manages the certification application, organizes staff participation, and carries out many of the actions needed to maintain certification. With limited capacity, Nicole takes on a significant share of the work required to keep the school's sustainability efforts moving forward and maintain its silver-level certification.



The 2026 certification cycle illustrates just how much that entails. The green team met monthly, with a focus on gathering and organizing documentation for completed actions included in the school's certification application. The team reviewed initiatives ranging from waste reduction and energy conservation to environmental education, community partnerships and student-led projects. Photographs, lesson plans, meeting agendas, participation data, and reflections were compiled to document the scope and impact of the school's efforts. For Nicole, the work is about more than earning points. It is an opportunity to recognize and strengthen efforts already happening

throughout the school. “The Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification, I do this for the students and teachers,” she explained. “It’s a lot of work, but our community benefits.”

That work has helped bring sustainability into many aspects of school life. Cape May City Elementary’s 2026 certification recognized initiatives related to healthy schools, food and nutrition, diversity and equity, student and community outreach, curriculum, green purchasing, digital learning, and more. The school’s green team describes sustainability as embedded throughout its culture—from classroom instruction and student leadership to family engagement and daily operations.

Over the years, the district has received \$10,000 in [Sustainable Jersey for Schools grants](#), supporting projects that have expanded sustainability education and improved the school environment. Review the [Cape May City Elementary School Certification Report](#) to see the actions the school has completed.

Harmony School Garden

Nicole has always loved nature and being outside and she brings this enthusiasm for the outdoors into her work. As a National Wildlife Federation-certified wildlife habitat, Cape May City Elementary School’s campus offers students an unusual opportunity to learn about the natural world in their community. The campus includes woods, succession fields, and a salt marsh. But one of Nicole’s favorite places is the newly refurbished Harmony School Garden, a space that has become an outdoor classroom for students.

Nicole secured a [Sustainable Jersey for Schools grant](#) funded by the PSEG Foundation to revitalize the school’s aging garden and transform it into a functional, hands-on learning space. Working with the school’s Earth Club, students helped take the garden apart and build it back up. The project began with students removing the old, deteriorating wooden garden beds. They cleared debris, leveled the land, and prepared the site for a fresh start. Nicole used the work as an opportunity to teach students why proper ground preparation is important for successful planting while encouraging teamwork.

“I didn’t have a green thumb, but I’ve learned so much along with the students as we’ve improved our garden,” Nicole said. “The kids aren’t just participating in a project; they’re taking ownership.” One of the exciting parts of the transformation was constructing three new metal raised garden beds. Students helped build the beds indoors before moving them outside to their designated location. The three 8-by-5-foot beds are located in a sunny area near a side entrance, making the garden easily accessible for students to visit and observe throughout the school year.

Building the new beds also opened the door to conversations about sustainability and the value of using durable materials that can provide a longer-lasting solution. Students built a trellis and learned about irrigation and sprinkler systems, exploring how water can be distributed efficiently to support healthy plant growth and making connections to water conservation. The learning began before the seedlings reached the garden. Students started seeds in the classroom under grow lights, carefully monitoring their plants and learning what they need to thrive. The green team spoke with students and staff to determine what plants would work best in the area, and then the students made a diagram to show where their plants would be planted within the raised beds.

Two years ago, when the school was not open for summer school, the Earth Club expanded the gardening experience by using grow bags that allowed students to plant their own seeds and take their plants home to care for throughout the summer. When students returned in September, they were excited to share stories and pictures of what they had grown and learned from caring for their plants over the summer. The garden now produces tomatoes, green peppers, carrots, round squash, and zucchini, along with herbs including basil, lavender, and the students’ favorite, mint. Students enjoy smelling the basil and tasting the mint growing in the garden.



The garden has also created new learning opportunities for special education students, who have become enthusiastic participants in understanding what plants need to grow. Earth Club members shared vegetables they had grown under the grow lights with these students. During lessons, students completed graphic organizers focused on individual plants and the essential elements they need to thrive. The Earth Club, which is open to all fourth- through sixth-grade students, has long led the school's garden program with support from the broader school community. Cape May City Elementary School received 10 Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification points for completing the [School Gardens](#) action.

Nature in Their Own Backyard

Nicole's efforts to connect students with nature extend beyond the school garden. The school's Cape Island Creek Nature Trail has its own history of environmental education and community stewardship. Originally created by a fifth-grade teacher and his students in the 1970s as an outdoor classroom, the trail later became overgrown. In 2001, Sandy Sandmeyer-Bryan—Nicole's former teacher and mentor—helped lead an effort with an environmental educator and former Cape May City Elementary students to find and reopen the trail.

More than two decades later, Nicole and her Earth Club students became part of that history. When the nature trail again became heavily overgrown and difficult to access, the Earth Club made restoring it a priority. Nicole and two volunteers marked the route of the overgrown trail and arranged for help from the school resource officer, who volunteered his time to clear and reestablish the path. Fallen trees and invasive brush were removed, and Earth Club students helped clean up sticks and debris.

The work reopened access to a unique natural resource just behind the school—a trail winding through the woods to the salt marsh along Cape Island Creek. With the trail accessible again, teachers can bring their classes outside for nature lessons, something the Earth Club actively encouraged through its "Nature in Our Own Backyard!" outreach to teachers. Earth Club students also showcased the [trail brochure](#) and created educational materials to help others explore the area. The brochure serves as a self-guided tour, introducing students to features along the trail including invasive species, poison ivy, bamboo, Osage orange, the salt marsh and fiddler crabs, a salt pan, and a honey locust tree. Cape May City Elementary School received 10 Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification points for completing the [Innovative Project](#) action.



Sustainability Across the School

While Nicole directly leads projects through the green team and Earth Club, an important part of her certification work is helping bring together and document sustainability efforts happening throughout Cape May City Elementary School. The school's 2026 certification application included projects and programs led by students, teachers, administrators and other staff, demonstrating how sustainability has become woven into many aspects of school life.

Nicole's own classroom contributed to the school's certification success. Her Digital Innovative Classroom submission highlighted the ways she uses technology to support communication, differentiated instruction, and student independence. She uses ClassDojo to maintain regular communication with families, provides students with flexible learning spaces, and integrates digital tools into individualized learning activities. The action earned the school 15 certification points for completing the [Digital Innovative Classroom](#) action.

Little Library for Younger Readers

Just as Sandy Sandmeyer-Bryan helped nurture Nicole's interest in sustainability and encouraged her to become a leader herself, Nicole is now helping foster a school culture where students are empowered to develop sustainability ideas of their own. The idea for a little library at Cape May City Elementary School started with an

observation by students that kids deserved a place of their own to discover a good book. At the same time, the students were learning about waste and how many usable books can end up in the waste stream. They began thinking about how those books could instead be given a second life.

“Although several local homes had begun installing free little libraries, most were filled with books geared toward adults,” Nicole explained. “The students wanted to make sure younger children had one of these cool libraries with books they liked.” The Student Council took the initiative to obtain a library and spent their meeting time planning and building it. The project became an extension of classroom conversations about waste and sustainability. Students discussed how gently used books can be reused rather than thrown away and organized a variety of age-appropriate books, including picture books and early readers. Many of the books have been donated, giving them a second life. Once the library was stocked, students introduced it to the community and encouraged families to visit.



For Nicole, seeing students take an idea and turn it into a project that benefits others reflects the kind of student leadership that sustainability education can inspire. Cape May City Elementary School received 10 Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification points for the project through the [Innovative Project](#) action.

Breakfast After the Bell

Through its Breakfast After the Bell program, Cape May City Elementary School provides free, universal breakfast to all students, making a healthy morning meal accessible without requiring students to arrive at school early. Breakfast is served in the classroom after the school day begins, allowing more students to participate.

Students enter their classrooms to find breakfast waiting for them and eat while teachers collect homework, take attendance and prepare for the school day. The approach makes breakfast a natural part of the morning routine without requiring students to arrive early or eat in the busy all-purpose room. Nicole said she values the program because many students in the school community face economic challenges. “By offering breakfast to everyone at no charge, the school helps ensure that students can begin their day with the nutrition they need to learn and participate in the classroom. We found that our breakfast participation definitely increased from previous implementations,” Nicole said.

The school’s food service staff play an important role in making the program successful, delivering and collecting breakfast from each classroom and visiting with students to hear their questions and suggestions. The program demonstrates how Cape May City Elementary School’s sustainability efforts extend beyond environmental projects to include student health and wellness. Cape May City Elementary School received 20 Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification points for completing the [Breakfast After the Bell](#) action.

More About Nicole

Nicole grew up in Cape May City with her mother and two older brothers while her father traveled frequently for his work with the Coast Guard. Nicole earned a Master of Science in Special Education from Saint Joseph’s University and a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education and Psychology from Stockton University. In recognition of her dedication to her students and school community, she was named Cape May City Elementary School’s 2023 Teacher of the Year. Nicole and her husband, James, were married in November and celebrated with a honeymoon in Alaska, where they especially enjoyed the scenery and watching bald eagles.