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Shaina Brenner

Second Grade Teacher, Elms Elementary School
Co-Leader, Jackson School District Sustainability Committee
Ocean County, New Jersey

Shaina Brenner is a second-grade teacher at [Elms Elementary School](#) and co-leader of the Jackson School District Sustainability Committee. She has spent more than a decade helping students understand their connection to the environment while building systems and programs that create lasting change throughout her school district.

Shaina brings an unmatched level of dedication, energy, and vision to everything she does. From establishing school-wide recycling, energy efficiency, and food-sharing programs to securing funding for innovative environmental projects, she is a driving force behind sustainability efforts in [Jackson School District](#).

"I know that my drive and intensity can sometimes feel like a lot," Shaina said. "But it comes from a place of deep passion and an unshakable belief in what's possible when we dream big for kids." That commitment has strong roots. One of seven children, Shaina grew up surrounded by nature after her parents moved the family from Brooklyn, New York, to Boothbay Harbor, Maine, where they operated a motel. She spent countless hours exploring the property's eight acres with her siblings, developing a love for the outdoors and an appreciation for the natural world. Her parents instilled values that continue to guide her work today. They taught her the importance of hard work and striving for excellence. "My father taught me at an early age the importance of integrity and aligning my words and actions," Shaina said. "If I'm asking students to recycle or care for the environment, then I need to be doing those things myself."

Shaina approaches environmental education with the belief that schools play a vital role in preparing the next generation to care for and protect the world around them. Her impact can be seen in the thousands of students who have gained hands-on sustainability experience, the educators she has inspired across New Jersey, and the environmental programs that continue to flourish through the systems and practices she helped establish.

Building Sustainability Into the District: One of Shaina's strengths is her ability to think beyond individual projects and create systems that can sustain themselves over time. In partnership with the district's former Energy Specialist, [John Blair](#), Shaina co-founded the Jackson School District Green Team. The district-wide initiative brought representatives from each school together to foster collaboration, share resources, and support the implementation of sustainable practices across the district.

As the district's sustainability efforts have evolved, Shaina has continued to play a leadership role by working closely with district administration through the District Sustainability Committee. This transition has helped shift the focus from collaboration among individual schools to the development and implementation of district-wide sustainability initiatives, allowing successful programs and practices to be scaled across all schools.

Shaina also plays a key role in coordinating [Sustainable Jersey for Schools certification](#) efforts across the district. Today, every school in the Jackson School District is certified with Sustainable Jersey for Schools, with Elms Elementary School achieving silver-level certification (Read the [Elms Elementary 2025 Certification Report](#)). Elms is the only school certified at the silver-level in Ocean County. She credits the program with helping schools turn ideas into action. "I wouldn't have been able to do what I do without the funding and actions from the Sustainable Jersey for



Schools program," Shaina said. "The grants have been invaluable. The certification process shows us what to do and how to do it, while introducing us to sustainable actions we may not have otherwise considered." The Jackson School District earned the 2024 Sustainability Makes Sense Award from Sustainable Jersey for Schools. For the award's event, Shaina produced a video showcasing the district-wide sustainability initiatives: [Sustainability Makes Sense Award video](#).

The impact of these efforts was recognized nationally when the U.S. Department of Education named Elms Elementary School a [Green Ribbon School](#) on Earth Day 2022. Elms was the only New Jersey school to receive the designation that year and became the first school in Ocean County to earn the honor.

Inspiring Student Leadership Through the Green Team: In 2021, Shaina collaborated with two colleagues to revitalize and restructure the student green team at Elms Elementary School. What began as a school club has evolved into one of the school's most popular student leadership opportunities. Today, approximately 50 students apply each year to participate.



As green team leader, Shaina plans and facilitates meetings, develops projects, coordinates partnerships with community organizations, and mentors students as they take ownership of sustainability initiatives. The student green team conducts classroom recycling and energy audits, leads school-wide energy conservation contests, creates educational videos, and helps maintain the school's 500-gallon [aquaponics garden](#) and outdoor sensory garden (both [funded by Sustainable Jersey for Schools grants](#) from the New Jersey Educational Association (NJEA) and the PSEG Foundation). Members also deliver presentations to classrooms, educating their peers about environmental responsibility and sustainable practices. Shaina works closely with teachers and staff to align green team activities with broader educational goals. She also helped integrate sustainability into classroom learning. Shaina rewrote the district's second-grade curriculum, adding lessons focused on ocean pollution, beach erosion, pollinators, and environmental stewardship. View the [Elms Student Green Team website](#).

Creating a Comprehensive Recycling Culture: Shaina said she is proud of the [Elms Elementary School's comprehensive recycling program](#). To launch the initiative, she secured funding through a Parent Teacher Network grant to purchase recycling bins for every classroom and office. She then trained staff on Ocean County recycling guidelines before educating student green team members, who in turn taught students throughout the school. The recycling program, launched school-wide in 2021, continues to thrive. Each year, students and staff receive updated training, and green team members conduct recycling audits to provide feedback and improve participation.



Beyond traditional recycling, Shaina has also implemented several specialty recycling initiatives. Students collect used crayons that are donated to [The Crayon Initiative](#), which transforms discarded crayons into new crayons for children in hospitals. The school participates in manufacturer recycling programs for toner cartridges and printer ink cartridges, ensuring these materials are responsibly recycled. In addition, Shaina has coordinated plastic film collection efforts that have diverted more than 1,000 pounds of plastic film from landfills as part of the [NexTrex Recycling Challenge](#).



Reducing Food Waste: Shaina developed the [Elms Elementary School's Food Share Program](#). With funding secured through a Parent Teacher Network grant, she purchased a refrigerator and developed a system that allows students to donate unopened food items they do not plan to eat. The student green team helps educate students about food waste and the importance of sharing resources. The program serves multiple purposes. Recovered food is made available to other students, helping ensure that edible food remains in use rather than becoming waste. Food that cannot be used within the school is donated to the Jackson Food Pantry.

Shaina also transports apples and carrots to [Helping Hearts Equine Rescue in Millstone](#), ensuring those items are put to good use as animal feed. Building on the success of the program, Shaina secured a [\\$15,000 Sustainable Jersey for Schools Food Waste Grant](#) to expand food recovery efforts throughout the district. Working closely with the district's Director of Food Services, she has helped identify opportunities to reduce waste, improve sustainability practices, and strengthen community engagement. The Food Share Program teaches students that sustainability is about more than environmental protection. It is also about compassion, resource conservation, and supporting others in the community.



Creating an Outdoor Environmental Learning Center: Perhaps the most visible example of Shaina's vision is the Outdoor Environmental Learning Center and Garden at Elms Elementary School. The project began with a simple goal: creating a space where students could learn about pollinators. As Shaina developed the concept and wrote the grant application, the idea evolved into a comprehensive outdoor classroom that would support environmental education across grade levels. Funded through a \$10,000 [Sustainable Jersey for Schools grant](#) funded by NJEA and supported by numerous community partners, the [Outdoor Environmental Learning Center](#) officially opened in September 2025. Watch the [overview video](#).

The space includes an insect hotel, bird houses, bird feeders, bat house, weather station, greenhouse, rain barrel, composting area, seed library, kindness rock garden, oak tree nursery, native plant gardens, and outdoor instructional spaces. Local businesses and community members played an important role in bringing the project to life. A nursery donated more than \$1,000 worth of native plants, landscaping professionals contributed materials and labor, and local contractors helped construct key features.

Today, the Outdoor Environmental Learning Center serves as a living classroom where students investigate ecosystems, observe wildlife, monitor weather conditions, study pollinators, and engage in hands-on environmental learning. The site has earned recognition as a [Jersey-Friendly Yard](#), [National Wildlife Federation Certified Schoolyard Habitat](#), [Monarch Waystation](#), and [Xerces Society Pollinator Habitat](#). Its success has inspired similar efforts elsewhere in the district. Shaina is currently leading the revitalization of the middle school courtyard into an outdoor environmental learning space that will include a greenhouse, pond ecosystem, and native plantings.

Leadership Beyond Jackson School District: Shaina's impact extends beyond her district. She served on the Education Steering Committee of the [New Jersey Plastic Advisory Council](#), where she provided valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities schools face when implementing recycling programs. Her contributions have helped inform statewide discussions about reducing plastic waste and improving recycling practices.



She also serves on the Leadership Academy Steering Committee for the [New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association](#) and is a member of the New Jersey Commissioner's Teacher Advisory Council. During the 2025-2026 school year, Shaina was selected for the [JerseyCAN Teacher Leader Fellowship](#), a statewide leadership initiative focused on educational policy, instructional improvement, and systems-level change. A frequent presenter at conferences, she regularly shares her experiences and best practices with educators across New Jersey. In 2024, she presented at Sustainable Jersey's [New Jersey Sustainability Summit](#) as part of a panel discussion focused on advancing sustainability initiatives in schools ([Presentation Slides](#)). Her leadership has been recognized through numerous awards, including the [National Milken Educator Award in 2022](#) and Educator of the Year honors at two different schools.

More About Shaina: Shaina earned an MA in Educational Leadership from Montclair State University and a BA in Communication and Organizational Leadership from Rutgers University. While attending Rutgers, she was an on-air host at 88.7 FM WRSU, where she met her husband. Today, he works as a videographer and frequently collaborates with Shaina on her fabulous school sustainability videos. Shaina has a 21-year-old son, Aden, and a 16-year-old dog named Chenzy. In their free time, the family enjoys spending time outdoors, exploring nature, attending live music events together, and spending time with horses, one of Shaina's lifelong passions.