Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is the third largest public school district in the nation. It encompasses more than 675 facilities, serves over 400,000 students, and employs over 40,000 people. As Mayor Richard M. Daley has a goal to make Chicago “the most environmentally friendly city in the nation” and CPS has an interest in becoming a greener school district, CPS developed an Environmental Action Plan (EAP) to improve its environmental footprint. The EAP identifies 26 strategies with a mission to minimize the district’s environmental impact and teach students to be environmental stewards.

The EAP’s 26 strategies fall into six categories: transportation and air, energy, waste, land, water and engagement. Each category then lists an environmental goal, the strategies for achieving that goal and status indicators of red, yellow or green, identifying the progress of each strategy. Since 2008, when the EAP was developed, CPS has implemented district-wide policies and recommendations in five of the six categories (excluding water), achieving green status for 14 of the 26 strategies, and yellow status for 10 of the 26 strategies, leaving only two of 26 strategies in red. Much progress has been made in the energy and waste categories, as reductions in energy and waste stand to have the most direct positive impact on the environment and save the most money for the district. Moving forward CPS is challenged with addressing another part of the EAP’s mission—to teach students to be environmental stewards—and the EAP’s proposed goal 10e, to “encourage a Green Team, club, or environmental science class at each school”, which has a status indicator of red.

The CPS Environmental Programming Assessment is designed to look at the status of environmental programming (EP) in CPS to inform the Director of Environmental Affairs, Suzanne Carlson, of the possible ways that the Environmental Affairs team can support schools in educating students to be environmental stewards. This assessment’s data was collected through semi-structured interviews with staff and administrators at randomly selected schools in each area of the school district. Many of the interviewees were principals or assistant principals; the teachers were most often science teachers, coaches and science department chairs or coordinators; though math, English and social studies teachers participated as well. With an overview of EP in CPS, the district can highlight best practices, identify challenges and consider options for supporting schools as they work to educate students to be environmental stewards. Due to the size of CPS and the relative autonomy that school administrations have in directing their institutions, we expected to find a full range of EP, from little to no EP occurring in schools, to schools incorporating EP into their school’s mission statement and/or day-to-day activities.

1 [www.cps.edu/GoGreen](http://www.cps.edu/GoGreen)
This assessment focuses on EP rather than environmental education (EE) because it captures a range of activities that schools are doing to educate students about the environment; including classroom activities, school assemblies, lunchroom activities, afterschool, summer and weekend programs, and so on. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this assessment, the North American Association for Environmental Education’s (NAAEE) definition of EE is used to determine what qualifies as EP in CPS. Programs or in-class activities that include number one (below), along with any of the other components are noted as having EP in this assessment. The NAAEE’s definition of EE is,

A process that aims to develop an environmentally literate citizenry that can compete in our global economy, that has the skills, knowledge, and inclination to make well-informed choices concerning the environment, and that exercises the rights and responsibilities of members of a community.

To be effective, environmental education programs should include subjects related to: 1) knowledge of environmental processes and systems, including the Earth as a physical system, the living environment, humans and their societies, and environment and society; 2) questioning and analysis skills; 3) environmental issues investigation skills; 4) decision and citizenship skills; and 5) personal and civic responsibility.

In order to learn if CPS schools are meeting the abovementioned definition, these primary questions were considered:

1. What is the status of environmental programming in CPS?
2. What are best practices for environmental programming in CPS?
3. What are challenges preventing environmental programming in CPS?
4. What suggestions do interviewees have for implementing the CPS EAP proposed goal 10e, to “encourage a Green Team, club, or environmental science class at each school” at the school level?

The report includes a review of EP in CPS, a detailed description of the methodological process for collecting the data, the data collected, analysis of the data, conclusions drawn, recommendations for further research, and possible next steps for CPS as it works towards teaching students to be environmental stewards. Guidance and suggestions for this assessment were provided by the CPS Environmental Affairs Director, Suzanne Carlson, the CPS Environmental Outreach Coordinator, Steve Clark, and the Office of Teaching and Learning—Science Acting Director, John Loehr.

The data collected for this project broadly covers EP in CPS. It indicates that there is an overall presence of EP in the public schools; however, the extent varies from school to school. Eighty six percent of interviewees mentioned that at least one teacher in their schools adds EP to their existing curriculum in the classroom. Sixty eight percent of interviewees reported that students respond favorably to EP in class, resulting in 48 percent of respondents stating that their students had changed their behavior towards more environmentally aware actions. In addition to in-class activities, 49 percent of schools host single-day, school-wide events such as Earth Day celebrations or waste-free lunches; and 73 percent have ongoing environmental projects like recycling and gardening that engage students in EP. Conversely, 84 percent of interviewees reported that their schools’ staff is unfamiliar with the CPS EAP and the resources provided on the Go Green web site. This means that the majority of schools have some level of EP in their schools that is reaching their students; however, the majority of staff members are unaware that the CPS has an environmental action plan, and that there are resources and central office staff dedicated to its success. Overall, the data indicates CPS is achieving progress
for EAP proposed goal 10e, but there is still work to be done to ensure that EP reaches all of the schools.

The CPS Environmental Programming Assessment set out to examine the status of EP in the district. The expectation was that EP would vary across the district and from school to school. The data reveals that this is the case; some schools are hardly covering EP, while others have passionate teachers who incorporate EP into their classes, and still other schools are incorporating EP into much of their schools’ day-to-day programming. This is both positive and negative news for the CPS Environmental Action Plan (EAP). The upside is that CPS is already on track to achieve the EAP proposed goal 10e, and that many Chicago students are learning how to be environmental stewards. On the other hand, there is still much work to do to connect with, and support, the schools who are not educating their student populations with environmental programming. To improve the status of EP in CPS, the CPS Environmental Affairs team, in conjunction with other CPS departments, should focus on four areas: 1) define what it means to be a student environmental steward; 2) provide EP resources and training to teachers, and share best practices that already exist in many schools; 3) connect various school personnel and neighborhood community members; and 4) utilize the CPS Go Green website to provide resources and increase communication and outreach efforts.

With these four areas of focus in mind, CPS can improve EP and student awareness of environmental issues around them. Overall, it may be necessary to increase communication between CPS’ central office staff and schools, and between the Environmental Affairs team and other CPS departments. Moving forward EP should involve a holistic approach—engaging school and community members in helping CPS students to become environmental stewards. Since so many interviewees are unaware of the CPS EAP, more work should be done to spread the message that CPS is going green and that there are resources available to help schools meet the EAP goals. Finally, it will be important for schools to understand their needs towards meeting the EAP’s goals so that schools can seek out resources and guidance from the Environmental Affairs team and improve environmental engagement in their school community.