

# TEENS REACHING YOUTH FOR THE ENVIRONMENT



## TRY for the Environment

*An environmental leadership program for middle and high school students*

Teens Reaching Youth (TRY) for the Environment is a teen-led environmental education program that teaches environmental literacy and responsibility to Vermont youth. TRY's four program areas consist of 6 one-hour, elementary-aged lessons that are fun, hands-on, and taught by middle and high school students! Topics include:



**Renewable Energy** highlights wind and solar energy. Grades K-3



**Climate Change Through Waste Solutions** focuses on the 4Rs—reduce, reuse, recycle and rot. Grades K-3



**Food Systems** explores the need to protect our soil, seeds, pollinators and climate. Grades 2-4



**Forests & Trees** investigates the basic concepts of forest & tree stewardship. Grades 2-4



**TRY 4-H<sub>2</sub>O** examines the water cycle, watersheds, water quality and health, and aquatic life. Grades 3-4

TRY invites young people to become change agents by working together to puzzle out solutions to real-world environmental problems. TRY gives teens the opportunity to practice and improve their transferable skills by working as a group on important issues and sharing their knowledge with elementary students.

*"My second grade class had an amazing experience with TRY. The middle school leaders constantly impressed me with engaging hands-on activities, professionalism, and excitement for teaching. After the very first lesson my class and I were hooked. I had students who rearranged appointments and family visits so they wouldn't miss a day of school when TRY was coming to our class."*

**-Hannah Grier, teacher from Union Elementary School**

Through interactive lessons that raise awareness about important environmental issues, TRY teens make a difference in the lives of elementary school students. UVM Extension 4-H and program partners intentionally designed the TRY programs to inspire the future generation of Vermonters to be socially responsible, environmental stewards. TRY programs strengthen critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision making skills, and improve environmental literacy and sense of responsibility across grades K-12.

*"The Teens Reaching Youth program has allowed our students to become experts on energy and sustainability issues. It has enabled them to become agents of change through education."*

**-Don Taylor, teacher from Main Street Middle School**

After completing a program application, selected TRY teams that consist of 2-4 teens and one adult mentor participate in a one-day training on the 6 lessons and program expectations alongside other TRY teams and program partners. TRY teams commit to teaching the lessons to at least two different groups of at least 15 youth. This means they teach a minimum of 12 hours. Additional hours are spent marketing the program, setting up teaching times, preparing lessons, and completing required paperwork.

*“Beyond the content of the course, it’s inspiring to witness these talented middle school students leading the younger students through the learning experience. It’s very evident that strong bonds are being formed in the classroom and the young students really admire these intrepid middle schoolers, who in turn are also becoming great leaders. I can’t imagine a better program and a more important subject in an era of climate change.”*

**-Keil Corey, Vermont Natural Resource Council and former TRY mentor**

Together TRY teams decide on their audience and set their own schedules, which offers teams flexibility and the opportunity to develop a sense of ownership and project management skills. Target audiences include: in-school classes, afterschool programs, vacation camps, libraries, weekends and summer programs. Teams are provided with teaching materials, ongoing support, and feedback from program organizers.

*“I have learned: 1) leadership skills, 2) how to control and direct a class, 3) how to organize and prepare for lessons, 4) how to communicate with teachers and peers...I have definitely thought about my future and have thought about being a teacher when I grow up.”*

**-Northfield Middle School TRY team member**

Together TRY teams complete a self-reflection at the end of each program. They use the 4-H Lifeskills Wheel to identify three main life skills that were improved as a result of participating in TRY.

*“Learning to teach others and organize and plan lessons will be such a great skill either in a job like teaching or being a camp counselor. It will also help us when we need to do presentations. We learned how to ask good questions, speak clearly and check to make sure everyone understood the lesson. We also learned how to advertise our teaching to classes when we were first getting started.”*

**-Essex Middle School TRY Team**

TRY for the Environment received the Governor’s Award for Environmental Excellence in 2015, 2016 and 2017 for its innovative work. Learn more about TRY and watch a short video of a TRY team in action! (<https://youtu.be/Wyo7ff7DoEc>)

TRY is currently part of a pilot study to create a microcredentials badging system to support flexible pathways for Vermont student learning.

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(1) TRY teen teachers with students who engineered and modified sailboats that are propelled by a fan.



(2) A TRY teen teacher demonstrating how composting works through active play. Students role play decomposers and act out what happens in a compost pile.



(3) TRY team members made tree costumes to learn the main parts of the tree at the Forests & Trees program training and practice their best “tree” yoga pose!



(4) TRY team members at the Food Systems program training made flowers as part of the lesson on pollinators. They were learning about the pivotal role bees and other pollinators play in food production.



(5) Testing which windmill spins faster – 3 blades vs. 4 blades.

## Snap shot of the 2016-2017 TRY program:

- 110 teens trained in one of the TRY program areas, total of 32 TRY teams
- 22 TRY teams (82 teens) completed the entire program which consisted of teaching the 6 lesson curriculum to two different classrooms
- 6 TRY teams (18 teens) completed teaching the 6 lessons to one classroom
- 4 TRY teams were unable to teach any lessons due to inability to secure teaching location, lack of time management, or change of mind about commitment after the TRY training
- Total of 849 youth in grades K-5 were taught TRY lessons; 50 different classrooms reached
- Teens and their adult mentors volunteered 2120 hours.
- Reflections from teen teachers identified life skill gains, specifically planning/organizing, communication, teamwork, problem solving and leadership.
- K-5 students increased their environmental literacy.
- Feedback from the classroom teachers who had TRY in their classroom was positive.

## Teachers said:

- 82% said the teen teachers were positive role models for their students.
- 94% said that their students were more engaged in the lessons and ultimately had a deeper learning experience.
- “The teen teachers are fantastic!! My students were also excited to think that they could become TRY teachers when they are in middle school.”
- “Very impressive. My students were so disappointed it was over.”
- “I would love to have TRY back in my classroom every year.”
- “With my particular group of students this year, I found the impact of having strong positive role models to be even more important. I was so impressed with how engaged both my students were as well as the teens delivering the instruction. There is a wide variation in cognitive ability with this group of students; however, this was not visible with the positive support and feedback the teens provided during activities.”
- “It was so impressive to see these 3 middle school teachers be completely responsible, articulate, and highly encouraging as they taught important concepts.”

## Students learned:

### Renewable Energy

- 79% know light does not behave the same with all materials
- 89% know that a maple tree blocks more light in the summer than in the winter
- 62% know that a structure will cast a bigger shadow in the afternoon
- 98% know that wind can push objects
- 93% know that humans design things that use wind to work
- 93% know that the wind will blow sometimes hard and sometimes soft

### Waste Solutions

- 89% know that Vermont has a law that says people need to recycle and compost to keep valuable stuff from ending up in the trash.
- 63% know that some natural resources that humans use to make things are not renewable – which means once they are used up, they will be gone for good.
- 94% know that when you use less stuff, you create less garbage.
- 90% know that reusing materials keeps them out of the landfill.
- 89% know that plastic spoons cannot be composted.
- 98% know that they can do something today and every day to reduce, reuse, recycle and compost more of my waste to protect our Earth!

## Food Systems

- 99% know that the food system includes people, plants and animals, farms and factories, stores and restaurants, and more.
- 70% know that the Earth does not have a lot of good soil left for farming and growing crops.
- 78% know that grass helps protect soil from erosion.
- 96% know that seeds need air, sunlight, water and soil to grow into healthy plants.
- 95% know that bees are not the only animals that pollinate our plants.
- 96% know that climate change affects how plants grow.
- 99% know that there are a lot of different jobs in the food system, not just farming!
- 99% know that we need to care about our environment and take steps to protect it if we want to be able to keep growing food.

## Forests & Trees

- 100% know that Vermont without forests and trees would be bad because they provide us many things by just being forests and trees. They provide jobs, bring tourists, places to visit and relax and give us products.
- 94% know that trees have life cycles (from seed germination to death).
- 93% know that all trees have roots, a woody stem and a crown.
- 99% know that all trees need space, water, nutrients, sunlight, air to survive.
- 91% know that one question you have to answer when identifying trees is what pattern are the leaves and branches arranged on the tree.
- 98% know that a steward takes responsibility to learn about forests and makes smart decisions about forests and takes action on these decisions.

## *Teen teachers reflected:*

- “Our team also discovered the joy of learning to learn. Before [participating in TRY] none of us were ever too excited about classes; school is a mandatory activity, but it doesn’t mean it has to be fun. However, once actually becoming teachers, a change came over us. We never realized how difficult it could be to be a teacher and how really whatever we are taught is going to be important in the long run, much like saving the Earth.”
- “After the lesson, the teacher came over to us to tell us how a student who normally is never engaged in class was turned into a whole new person. This made us feel good in that we were making a difference in the students.”
- “While teaching we learned ourselves as we went on.”
- “Thank you for helping us with TRY. We learned a lot from this experience and were presented with real world working opportunities.”
- “During our teaching experience we had a lot of fun watching the students become encouraged to help pick up litter and preserve forests. We encouraged the students to pick up litter on their own, and they seemed really into it. It seemed especially cool because they automatically started to recycle all of the papers they didn’t need and pick up some around the classroom.”
- “We have learned from our teaching experience that having things prepared in advance before a lesson helps everything go smoother.”
- “TRY for the Environment was a very good experience for all of us. It put us in the perspective of the teacher, and it gave us an idea of what being a teacher would be like.”
- “We had a great time teaching the students. One really fun part of teaching them was when the kids would have a “light bulb”. It was so rewarding to see all of our hard work pay off.”
- “Something that I have gained during my teaching experience is that I now have more confidence to tell or teach other people what I am learning about because I have taught younger kids.”