



Successful Public Education Systems

Stormwater regulations have identified public education and participation as key features of holistic stormwater programs though this aspect is often overlooked. Typically, stormwater education focuses on the impacts of urban runoff and human behaviors that contribute to stormwater pollution. Rarely do education efforts describe and showcase stormwater best management practices. Facilitating public awareness of the function and benefits of BMPs can increase buy-in and create public demand for these features.

Benefits of public education

Most people don't recognize ponds, wetlands, swales and other natural stormwater features as sustainable stormwater BMPs. Well-designed systems can blend into the landscape without providing clues to their function. Letting citizens know that the natural area provides more than just aesthetic and recreational benefits will help raise awareness about stormwater management. It can also create demand in new developments for stormwater solutions that are attractive amenities rather than underground pipe networks. When consumers know what to ask for and developers know what to provide, multi-benefit stormwater features can become "business as usual."

Components of successful systems

There are a number of ways that to educate citizens about the functions and benefits of stormwater BMPs. One of the best is to install demonstration projects in high-visibility areas, particularly in public areas with high pedestrian traffic (e.g., at parks, along streets, at city hall, etc.). [Milwaukee](#) emphasizes the importance of demonstration BMP placement to maximize impact and exposure, and [Philadelphia](#) uses demonstrations to test new designs and technologies as well as to allow users to experience different types of BMPs.

Signage describing the function and amenities of sustainable stormwater management practices should be eye-catching and written in non-technical language. It should highlight a variety of benefits to which citizens can relate, such as reducing flooding, providing habitat for birds, or improving water quality in a local water body.



Signs describing a BMP's function should be eye-catching and non-technical, such as this example from Portland, Oregon.

Printed media can also be used to get the word out about BMPs in general and about specific projects. Blurbs with attractive photos of the system can be submitted to neighborhood or community newsletters, HOA brochures, local newspapers, and gardening magazines. Demonstration projects can also be photographed and chronicled on a community's Web site.

Another way to involve the public is to create a citizen advisory committee that can weigh in on decisions about municipal policies, BMP requirements, design standards, and other issues that will affect BMP

acceptability. A committee can offer a forum to discuss ideas with citizen representatives who will then disseminate these ideas to the rest of the community.

Image, identity and visibility

Demonstration projects and featured BMPs should exemplify that stormwater management practices can appeal to more than just engineers. The system should be recognizable as a feature separate from the surrounding landscape, whether subtly or ostensibly. Signage can help to identify the feature as “special” relative to other landscaped areas. If you are installing more than one demonstration project, one or more common design elements can help identify features as stormwater management controls. This approach might include the use of similar materials in each system (a low stone wall, a concrete barrier, an artful iron grate, etc.) or a unified graphic design for all signage. Also, get the word out to the community that these installations exist and let them know how they can benefit from similar installations.

“Reaching” the public – alternative outreach strategies

Does “showing” a BMP really get people thinking about it, or does it take a more interactive strategy to engage the public? How can communities get the public truly involved in stormwater management? [Kansas City’s](#) answer was to encourage citizens to create their own stormwater features by means of a major media campaign. [Portland](#) offers workshops to citizens and business owners for improving stormwater management on their own properties. These types of “hands on” approaches to stormwater education goes a step beyond demonstration projects and brochures and allows community members to have a direct impact on reducing runoff in a sustainable way. This direct involvement promotes ownership in stormwater systems and increases the likelihood that the BMPs will be accepted and maintained over the long term.

Educational programming

The question “what did you do at school today?” is a common one at family dinner tables and a powerful tool for bringing the ideas of sustainable water management into the home. Bringing stormwater to the classroom is a popular way to get both young people and old talking about stormwater issues. But how can stormwater BMPs appeal to youngsters? Schools can organize field trips to natural BMP systems that offer opportunities for outdoor classroom instruction, particularly when the BMP design incorporates wildlife habitat. Demonstration BMPs can be installed on school property with an accompanying curriculum on stormwater management and water quality issues. Older students can participate in monitoring the water quality of flows entering and exiting the BMP. These activities mesh well with other lessons about water resources and human impacts on the environment.

You may also be interested in:

[Benefits of Green Development](#)
[Bring Your Ideas to the Community](#)
[The Language of Change](#)

Case studies cited above:

- [Kansas City, MO](#)
- [Milwaukee, WI](#)
- [Philadelphia, PA](#)
- [Portland, OR](#)