



## District Sustainability Award Nominee Presentation Form

### CERTIFICATIONS

#### District's Certifications

The signatures of the district superintendent on the next page certify that each of the statements below concerning the district's eligibility and compliance with the following requirements is true and correct to the best of the superintendent's knowledge.

1. The district has been evaluated and selected from among districts within the Nominating Authority's jurisdiction, based on high achievement in the three ED-GRS Pillars: 1) reduced environmental impact and costs; 2) improved health and wellness; and 3) effective environmental and sustainability education.
2. The district is providing the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district wide compliance review.
3. OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district concluding that the nominated school district has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan to remedy the violation.
4. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the school district has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution's equal protection clause.
5. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or school district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.
6. The district meets all applicable federal, state, local and tribal health, environmental and safety requirements in law, regulations and policy and is willing to undergo EPA on-site verification.
7. The district has in place and is willing to provide a link to or copy of a non-discrimination policy, upon request. The U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a nomination and/or rescind an award if unlawful discrimination is later discovered.

### U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools District Sustainability Award

Name of Superintendent:

(Specify: Ms., Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

District Name:

(As it should appear on an award)

I have reviewed the information in this application and certify that to the best of my knowledge all information is accurate.

**John Puglisi, Ph.D.**

Digitally signed by John Puglisi, Ph.D.  
DN: cn=John Puglisi, Ph.D., o=Rio School District, ou,  
email=scervantez@rioschools.org, c=US  
Date: 2023.12.08 07:58:08 -08'00'

Date:

(Superintendent's Signature)



## Nominating Authority's Certifications

The signature by the Nominating Authority on this page certifies that each of the statements below concerning the district's eligibility and compliance with the following requirements is true and correct to the best of the Authority's knowledge.

1. The district is one of those overseen by the Nominating Authority which is highest achieving in the three ED-GRS Pillars: 1) reduced environmental impact and costs; 2) improved health and wellness; and 3) effective environmental education.
2. The district meets all applicable federal civil rights and federal, state, local and tribal health, environmental and safety requirements in law, regulations and policy and is willing to undergo EPA on-site verification.

Name of Nominating Agency:

Name of Nominating Authority:

(Specify: Ms., Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

I have reviewed the information in this application and certify to the best of my knowledge that the school meets the provisions above.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tony Thurmond".

Date:

(Nominating Authority's Signature)

## SUBMISSION

The nomination package, including the signed certifications, narrative summary, documentation of evaluation in the three Pillars, and photos should be submitted online according to the instructions in the Nominee Submission Procedure.

OMB Control Number: 1860-0509

Expiration Date: October 31, 2026

### Public Burden Statement

According to the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, no persons are required to respond to a collection of information unless such collection displays a valid OMB control number. The valid OMB control number for this information collection is 1860-0509. Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 37 hours per response, including time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. The obligation to respond to this collection is required to obtain or retain benefit P.L. 107-110, Sec. 501, Innovative Programs and Parental Choice Provisions. Send comments regarding the burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to the U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Ave., SW, Washington, DC 20202-4536 or email [ICDocketMgr@ed.gov](mailto:ICDocketMgr@ed.gov) and reference the OMB Control Number 1860-0509. Note: Please do not return the completed ED-Green Ribbon Schools application to this address.



# *Rio School District*

California Disadvantaged District Nominee to  
U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools



Prepared By:  
California Department of Education  
School Facilities and Transportation Services Division  
[Green Ribbon Schools Award Program](#)  
January 2024

## **PART II – SUMMARY OF ACHIEVEMENTS**

### **Rio School District, Oxnard, Calif.**

#### *A District's Journey in Cultivating Sustainability and Environmental Education in an Ecological Oasis*

The Rio School District (Rio) resides in an ecological setting and climate conducive to year-round cultivation, inspiring educators to foster sustainable interactions with the environment. Since 2015, district teachers have convened a group that conducts curriculum design sessions led by teachers and outside experts covering ethnobotany, native plants, remedies, and sustainability projects. Rio emphasizes a respectful relationship with the local environment, sustainability, collaboration with the indigenous community, and science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) integration through its newest school, Rio Del Sol STEAM Academy. The district's interdisciplinary approach emphasizes hands-on, experiential learning, integrating field trips and place-based learning to deepen students' understanding of local ecosystems and inspire sustainable practices. Since 2018, Rio has hosted *Compost Tea Parties* to enrich soil and promote natural garden management. In 2021, the district established the Rio Regenerative Farm to provide all Rio students with the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities to build a healthy and resilient environment, food system, and community. Rio conserves resources using automatic shut-off systems, timed irrigation, and waste reduction initiatives such as Zero-Waste awareness weeks and food-sharing tables. Student advocacy prompted impactful changes in school cafeterias, from removing straws to integrating local food through farm-to-school programs.

## **PART III – DOCUMENTATION OF STATE EVALUATION OF DISTRICT NOMINEE**

### **Pillar I: Reduce Environmental Impact and Costs**

#### *Element IA: Energy*

- In the 2023–24 school year, Rio partnered with the Southern California Regional Energy Network (SoCalREN) to obtain baseline data for gas and electric usage across the district. SoCalREN is a program funded by ratepayers that assists school districts in planning their energy usage. SoCalREN assisted Rio by generating a report that analyzed the district's overall energy usage patterns and associated costs. The next steps in this collaboration include recommendations from SoCalREN for efficiency projects, assistance in securing grant funding, and other available mechanisms to implement energy-efficient actions.
- The district uses the Pelican energy management system (Pelican) to ensure that heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems only operate in occupied spaces. The district uses the Pelican system to regulate the energy used in occupied rooms and to turn the systems off when school is not in session. The district also uses Pelican management tools to shut off HVAC units when doors are open, which reduces the room temperature by two degrees after a room has been unoccupied for five minutes.
- Responding to climate changes and an increase in hot days, the district installed HVAC systems in all its schools. The installation of these new systems in older buildings has created an increase in energy consumption. The district will use the 2023–24 school

year as a baseline to compare future conservation. Therefore, reduction percentages are not being presented in this nomination package due to their inefficiency in explaining the value of the district's conservation measures.

- Rio installed new energy-efficient HVAC at eight schools and replaced units with new energy-efficient systems that exceed *California Building Standards Code and Energy Code* in 16 Seasonal Energy Efficiency Ratio (SEER) ratings associated with lower energy consumption and costs.
- In 2019, the district used Proposition 39 *California Clean Energy Jobs Act* funds to replace and retrofit all fluorescent lighting at school sites with Light Emitting Diode (LED) lighting. All school and district buildings also use sensor lighting systems to shut down lighting when spaces are unoccupied.
- All district campuses have cool roof technology to help retain heat and cooling system energy. In addition to the reflective, cool roofing used on all school roofs, the district also has a standard sustainability practice of recycling the roofing product when its lifespan has expired and reroofing is necessary. Reflective cool roofing helps reduce energy bills by diminishing HVAC needs and decreasing roof operating temperature, which extends the roof's service life.
- The district prioritizes green spaces and outdoor classrooms in new construction and renovations to minimize concrete use and maximize shade. Efforts include expanding gardens, forming partnerships with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), the County of Ventura, and the Ventura County Resource Conservation District for tree planting, and renovating outdoor spaces. For example, Rio Real Dual Immersion Academy (Rio Real) replaced concrete with natural elements, promoting soil health and reducing runoff. Two campuses also received large shade structures to mitigate the heat island effect on pavement.
- Rio retrofitted schools across the district with window tinting and blinds or shades to reduce the heat index of the classrooms.

### *Element IB: Water and Grounds*

- All school sites have water meter systems to monitor domestic water usage. According to the district's report, there was a 15% decrease in water consumption from July to December 2022 compared to the same period in 2023.
- Through physical monitoring by personnel, the district reports a 25%–50% water irrigation reduction across sites by decreasing the number of irrigation days from nightly to two times per week. In January 2024, the Metropolitan Water District will conduct an irrigation survey and water audit at seven of the district's nine schools (at the seven schools connected to city water systems). The preliminary reports state that most of the schools will need new Smart controllers and repairs to sprinklers and irrigation lines. Once the data analysis is completed, the district plans to invest in the recommended controllers and modifications to further reduce water consumption at all sites.
- From 2019 to 2024, the district upgraded all sinks to no-touch timed automated systems, toilets to low-flow systems, and water fountains to filtered water systems. Ongoing collaboration with the City and County water districts is underway to establish baseline data, enabling the calculation of water usage reductions.
- Waterless urinals are in use in roughly 30% of the district's restrooms, and the district has installed touchless sinks that automatically turn off without motion. Additionally, Rio has replaced all flush valves with low-flow automatic valves.

- The district prioritizes native plants in outdoor spaces and reduces water consumption in non-essential areas. Approximately 30% of plants used on campuses are regionally native plants. Additionally, drip systems and mulch ensure healthy, permeable soil, complemented by educational events on *compost tea* fertilizer and beneficial bugs.
- All school sites have native gardens and plant habitats in various stages of sustainability. To further promote overall community and environmental health, the district has committed resources to expand and support all schools with garden revitalization projects.
- Rio strategically designed the architecture at its newest school, Rio del Sol STEAM Academy (Rio del Sol), with ecological building features and incorporated learning activities in sustainable design. Additionally, the school features outdoor elements, such as bioswales, drought-tolerant plantings, biomes, gardens, citrus groves, a dry creek pond, a mud walk, a green wall, and *stone splash beds* (designed to prevent soil erosion, control water runoff, and visibly demonstrate water drainage from the building's downspouts), creating opportunities for lessons on water conservation and watershed protection.

### *Element IC: Waste*

- The district reports a waste reduction rate of 58% based on calculations taken from Rio Del Sol, where the school implemented a reusable tray and utensil program for students. The district is expanding this program by ordering the materials needed to start this reusable program at the district's largest school, Rio Lindo Elementary. Discussions with Rio del Sol custodial staff revealed a significant reduction in daily trash, equivalent to one cubic yard, with a decrease of six 33-gallon bags.
- Nine Rio Schools are participating in waste separation programs. Five lead these efforts, while four sites are in training and beginning stages. Rio's waste separation program includes straining milk, recycling, composting, and a "share table" at every meal. Student leaders in school green teams encourage and assist students in correctly sorting trash. At the end of each meal, cafeteria staff pick up any food left on the shared tables and reuse unopened items or whole pieces of fruit.
- Schools within the district are tracking waste to reduce their carbon footprint further. For example, fourth-grade students at Rio Real Elementary have participated in the *Monterey Bay Aquarium Ocean Plastic Pollution Summit* since 2018. Through participation in the program, students survey the trash on campus and study the impacts of waste on local ecosystems.
- In 2018, students tracked waste data and presented the governing school board with ideas to reduce plasticware, straws, and polystyrene serving trays district-wide. The board approved the students' proposals, eliminated polystyrene trays and straws, purchased sporks instead of spoons and forks separately, and installed utensil dispensers so students could only take what they needed. The students also started a week of awareness around Earth Day called Zero Waste Week, where they encouraged other students to use fewer single-use items and sort their waste in the proper receptacle.
- The district uses Safety-Kleen, an authorized waste contractor and hazardous material handler, to dispose of hazardous materials such as batteries, light bulbs, and vehicle oils and fluids. Schools separate their hazardous materials into separate boxes or buckets for pick up. Additionally, the District has separate coolant and used oil filter bins with spill-proof protection to collect used coolants and oils for collection.

- Rio del Sol is committed to sustainability by incorporating Forest Stewardship Council-certified wood, recyclable carpets, low volatile organic compounds (VOC) materials, and reclaimed resources.

*Element ID: Alternative Transportation*

- The district calculated the most common modes of transportation for students by analyzing the following sources: bus rosters, student transportation surveys, observations of bicycles, scooters, and skateboards on campuses, enrollment packet transportation information, and the number of cars in the drop-off lanes. The recorded data indicates that 32% of students walk, 25% carpool, 20% use the school bus, and 3% utilize human-powered modes of transportation, such as bikes, scooters, and skateboards.
- Rio Real Elementary School and Rio del Valle Middle School (Rio del Valle) used Safe Routes to Schools funding to add sidewalks and crosswalks leading to their schools.
- Rio Plaza Elementary (Rio Plaza) and Rio Lindo have identified ways to create additional safe routes by initiating walking groups and highlighting days like "walk to school" or "ride your bike to school" days, which encourage parents to reduce emissions by walking to school for the morning and after school drop off instead of driving.
- All school sites have various open entry gates to encourage walking to school and multiple bike racks and skateboard racks to encourage biking to school.
- In the 2023–24 school year, all nine sites collaborated with Safe Routes to School and their Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) for at least two *Walk/Roll to School Days*. Parents will either walk or drive to a nearby park and then collectively walk to school to raise awareness of walking from home, reduce traffic during drop-off/pick-up, and encourage eco-friendly transportation.
- Designated carpool spaces exist at the District Office. Buses have a no-idling policy at all locations. All vehicle loading and unloading areas are marked and located at least 25 feet from doors and windows to protect indoor air quality.
- The district prioritizes finding the shortest routes to minimize driving times and emissions. Buses are parked at schools during the day, reducing fuel needs and emissions by avoiding additional drive time to the main bus lot.
- Rio purchased property on May 19, 2021, to build a new transportation operations building. The new transportation facility plans include electric charging stations for electric buses. The long-term plan is to reduce diesel gas-burning buses by replacing them with clean energy electric buses once the facility is complete and there is a place to charge them.
- The district's fleet uses the Cleaire Advanced Emission Controls system, verified by the California Air Resources Board, to capture over 85% of particulate matter. Biannual opacity readings measuring particulate emissions show that 100% of the fleet, including two district trucks, meets California emissions requirements of 5% or less on the emissions opacity test.
- During parent support nights, parents receive support on how to ride the city bus from the district's family outreach specialists. Several city bus routes make stops by district schools to provide parents the opportunity to utilize alternative transportation services. The district provides bus fare to homeless families or families in need and has helped communicate the "kids ride free" campaign of the city bus system.

- Rio Lindo School has partnered with the city bus transit services to provide an onsite field trip that brings the bus to campus so kindergarten students can get on the bus and learn how the transit system works. Teachers utilize city buses to take local field trips to the Oxnard Library or Heritage Square in downtown Oxnard.

## **Pillar II: Improve the Health and Wellness of Students and Staff**

### *Element IIA: Environmental Health*

- Rio contracts West Oaks Pest Control to handle pesticide reporting and application. The district has implemented an integrated pest management (IPM) program to control pests effectively using various techniques. Rio uses pesticides that pose the least possible hazard and effectively minimize risks to people, property, and the environment according to established regulations and treatment thresholds.
- Since 2022, the district, Ojai Raptor Center, City of Oxnard, and Rio Rosales Elementary have collaborated to address the gopher issue in the neighboring park by introducing barn owls and raptors. The students learned about owls and habitat destruction, and the unit culminated in an action project where students worked with these partners to solve the pest problem without using pesticides. The project serves as a pilot study for the city to test the viability of utilizing birds of prey for pest management at other Oxnard parks.
- Rio follows the Healthy Schools Act to minimize chemical exposure to students and staff. Custodial staff posts information around campus, informing parents and staff about the planned chemical use on campus. Additionally, the posts remain for 72 hours after chemical use to inform school visitors. Additionally, the IPM team receives yearly training to ensure they receive the most up-to-date information regarding pesticide safety and training courses approved by the Department of Pesticide Regulation.
- To ensure the safe use of chemical products in science labs, teachers and custodial staff follow the Environmental Protection Agency's Chemical Management Resource Guide for schools. School personnel safely store and separate chemicals according to the guidelines set forth by the American Chemical Society (ACS).
- Rio custodial and maintenance staff frequently participate in training to ensure they follow proper procedures while performing maintenance at school sites. When a staff member submits a work order on a classroom or building, custodial and maintenance personnel only use lead-free materials and check for asbestos.
- All lab spaces and facilities are free of elemental mercury, and established safety guidelines prohibit its purchase. Trained staff store general chemicals on separate shelves and containers according to their compatible categories per ACS guidelines, while designated storage containers hold flammable and acidic chemicals. The district's science teacher on special assignment supports safe chemical practices through regular inventory checks and coordination of new purchases with office managers and district administration.
- Custodial staff also use chemical-based and greener products to reduce the levels of bacteria and viruses. The custodial staff also use concentrate formulas to reduce the consumption of single-use plastic containers for cleaning products.
- All district HVAC systems have built-in HEPA air filters and ionizers. This additional filtration assists with removing particulates, microbes, and airborne viruses. Custodial staff replaces air conditioning and heating unit filters every three months. In addition to replacing filters and adding ionizers, Rio ensures that heating and air conditioning units run throughout the school day to improve air filtering.



- Rio staff works closely to ensure every facility and classroom is safe and conducive to learning. When school is in session, school staff complete a work order as soon as problems arise to ensure the maintenance staff can investigate and fix mold or excess humidity issues. The district also routinely checks all facilities for leaks and addresses repair needs as appropriate. Routine maintenance and needs assessments are done annually and monitored through the annual *Facility Inspection Toolkit* checklist.
- Classrooms around the district showcase scenic surroundings like parks and playgrounds. Hallways exhibit trees and flowers, while external doors open to playgrounds, fields, and natural habitat paths. Some classrooms boast internal quads with trees and seating, while others feature gardens. Aesthetic design prioritizes natural beauty, promoting a connection to the outdoors through open doors and windows. Views may include the Santa Clara River bottom, mountains, and meandering paths with native plants. Additional features encompass owl boxes, grassy quads, and expansive playfields shaded by mature trees.
- Rio del Sol actively integrates ecological sustainability, environmental education, and economic efficiency by meeting high-performance building criteria. Its design features include strategically oriented buildings, maximizing natural light with translucent insulated panels, and creating shaded seating nooks with southern exposure punched windows. Makerspaces and classrooms optimize natural light through translucent panels and tubular skylights.

### *Element IIB: Nutrition and Fitness*

- Since 2013, the Rio Child Nutrition Services Department has implemented a Farm to School program. Schools scratch-cook all meals for students. In addition, lunch menus feature plant-based entrees on “Meatless Mondays.”
- Since 2023, the district reintroduced salad bars at all school sites, featuring a diverse selection of locally sourced produce, with 30-40% of the produce originating from Ventura County.
- For the 2023–24 school year, about half of the district's school sites offered breakfast in the classroom instead of before school to increase the number of students who partake. At Rio del Valle, for example, offering food during homeroom has increased the number of students eating breakfast at school from 8% to 40% compared to the former model.
- Rio launched a district bakery for the 2023–24 school year to enhance its culinary offerings. This initiative plays a crucial role in expanding the production of scratch-cooked items for the district's *Breakfast in the Classrooms* menus. Some recently introduced items include homemade Mexican sweetbread, bread rolls, and muffins, demonstrating a commitment to culinary innovation and development.
- Since 2018, the district has partnered with FoodCorps to promote hands-on garden and food education, cultivate a culture of health, and integrate students' learning experiences with cafeteria engagement. Three FoodCorps members, the district's nutrition and garden educator, and the farm-to-school coordinator engage students in cooking and garden-based lessons across nine school sites. Nutrition staff connect these experiences to the cafeteria by taste-testing recipes, selling school garden-harvested produce to the district for meals, and promoting local fruits and vegetables in the Harvest of the Month program.
- The district-level FoodCorps service member leads monthly, district-wide virtual Family Cook Nights that feature recipes centered on whole foods. The district records and posts cook night lessons on the district website and provides ingredients to all district families,

averaging between 100 to 150 kits monthly. The FoodCorps service member also focuses on local food procurement and works with the Rio District Farmer to purchase farm produce for district cafeterias.

- In 2021, the district purchased a 10-acre agricultural parcel adjacent to Rio Del Valle Middle School to create the Rio Regenerative Farm (Rio Farm). The Rio Farm is a production farm where growers work harmoniously with nature by building biodiversity and healthy soil to grow nourishing food for students. It also serves as an outdoor classroom for students to engage in regenerative farming practices integrated into STEAM. It creates opportunities for Rio students to develop essential knowledge, skills, and abilities to build a healthy and resilient environment, food system, and community.
- The Rio Farm produces vegetables to contribute to the diverse and locally sourced offerings in school meals. The district's Child Nutrition Department purchases the produce grown on the Rio Farm and prepares it in school cafeterias. After Rio Farm meets the district's produce needs, it will sell any available fruits and vegetables to neighboring school districts for school meals and donate some to families in the Rio community.
- The district hosted the Rio Regenerative Farm's Grand Opening in December 2023, hosting over 250 community members. The event featured a live dairy cow from the dairy council, soil demos by Rodale Institute California Organic Center, LEGO farm building, and harvested produce from the farm for guests to take home.
- In June 2023, Rio hosted a workshop day at the Rio Farm to help educators from Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties build environmental and garden education capacity in partnership with the California Global Education Program and School Garden Network from the University of California Santa Barbara.
- The district is working with Architecture, Construction, & Engineering (ACE) Charter High School to purchase a tractor for the Rio Farm that the high school students will use in their mechanical engineering curriculum, and the farm can use on the fields in the spring.
- Three of the nine schools are in the early development stages of garden revitalization, while six are in the advanced stages of garden revitalization and sustainability. Students and staff are involved in the planning and maintenance of these spaces alongside the district's four designated FoodCorps Garden and Nutrition educators and community partners, such as California Fish and Wildlife and Ventura Land Trust. The district also added sheds for storage and converted one into an outdoor office for a garden and nutrition educator.
- The district is establishing a 1.7-acre pollinator habitat on the Rio Farm with funding from a pollinator grant from the Ventura Resource Conservation Center. The project involves planting trees and shrubs, creating hedgerows, and implementing cover crops. These efforts are instrumental in supporting pollinator species and contribute to the overall establishment of biodiversity on the farm.
- Rio is partnering with the Fuerza Latina Association and League of United Latin American Citizens Colonia Council to participate in the *Food as Medicine Ox Program*. Each Friday, the District provides a box of organic food free to 100 Rio field worker families. To participate, families must have a pre-existing health condition such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or obesity. The purpose of the program is to improve health conditions through food.
- Rio del Valle Middle School (Rio del Valle) is transitioning into a sports and health academy. At Rio del Valle, physical education (PE) teachers use *Teacher Fit Advocate*,

a social, emotional, mental, and physical wellness tool designed to maximize counselor impact and provide resources the staff and students need to advocate for their wellness.

- All school sites participate in sports programs in partnership with the City of Oxnard. For example, in the 2023–24 school year, approximately 125 Rio del Valle students participated in fall sports. Rio del Valle hosted the first district-wide soccer tournament in the spring of 2023 and the first district flag football tournament in October 2023.
- The district is partnering with the California Physical Education-Health Project to provide professional development to district teachers, campus supervisors, and administrators. This partnership will significantly increase the quality of PE instruction and establish a standards-based, equitable health program. In the 2023–24 school year, schools are participating in site visits to assess the needs of the students, teachers, and programs, while middle school PE teachers receive training and support at district-wide professional development days.
- Rio students participate in outdoor education, exercise, and recreational activities outside of physical education, such as setting goals and tracking how many miles students can walk or run around the track or the perimeter of their playground. Schools also hold annual jog-a-thons, turkey trots, rainbow runs, and *Wellness, Fun, and Fitness Nights*.
- In the 2022–23 school year, Rio Real Dual Immersion Academy (Rio Real) expanded its garden area to include an outdoor sink, seating areas, and multi-purpose learning areas located alongside a meandering quarter-mile running path through the fields, encouraging students to use the various outdoor learning spaces during and outside of classroom time.
- District schools provide safe and welcoming learning spaces with shade structures, seating areas, and materials for science and gardening. Teachers and students utilize these resources for activities like nature journaling, connecting with the environment, and promoting mental health and science literacy.
- *Rio's Wellness Policy* includes the following focal areas: nutrition, physical education, health education, health services, counseling and support services, a healthy school environment, health promotion for staff, and community involvement. The district revised the policy in 2018 to include nutrition guidelines for all foods and beverages sold or made available on campus, food and beverage marketing policies, and measurable goals for nutrition promotion and education, physical activity, and other school activities promoting student wellness.
- The district's Active Wellness Committee convenes quarterly to update, promote, and collaborate on student and family resources. These include Healthy Food Guidelines, fundraising and celebration toolkits, and various promotional materials for physical activity. The committee establishes a central hub for accessing all district wellness resources. Engaging in health promotion activities throughout the school year, the committee organizes events like breakfast power, using a blender bike to teach kids to make healthy smoothies, and taste-testing sessions for new recipes or featured menu items.
- District staff receive annual professional development in the importance of self-care. In addition, some staff participate in yoga classes and drum circles at wellness workshops during the summer. The district also has an expanded counseling team that offers workshops on mindfulness. Furthermore, staff members receive access to various mental health applications, such as the CALM application, to help manage stress.

- Rio opened new wellness centers at each middle school, supported by the Student Behavioral Health Incentive Program (SBHIP), the Hope, Outreach, Partnerships, and Education (CalHOPE) grants, and local partnerships. These wellness centers offer resources to students, staff, and the community in mental and physical well-being practices and help support a sense of community and safety in the schools. Wellness centers are staffed with a school-based mental health and wellness clinician and parent liaison to develop wellness programs further.
- The district provides shade tents, umbrellas, and wide-brim hats for teachers to help reduce sun exposure. Water filtration systems also offer ways to refill water bottles, and kitchens provide water dispensers as a backup when needed.
- Rio employs several support staff to provide a comprehensive student health approach to families. The district utilizes its Intervention Progress Team, comprised of teachers, site administrators, counselors, nurses, and psychologists, to monitor academic needs and well-being. The district also has two full-time family development workers and two parent liaisons addressing families' basic needs, including clothing, food, and mental health referrals. Support specialists at school offices serve as the initial contact for families, identifying students facing homelessness, families with food shortages, and those needing essential supplies such as school items and clothing.
- The district consults with Oxnard Police Department and Ventura County Sheriff's Department on student and school safety topics. These partnerships provide parent workshops on internet and social media safety and support addressing safety on all campuses.
- Rio has teamed up with Foodshare, Ventura County's regional food bank, to offer groceries to families facing food shortages. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the district conducted drive-up food pantries to help thousands of families struggling with food scarcity due to loss of income.
- District staff utilize the *Caring Schools* curriculum, conduct community circles in their classrooms, and survey students through wellness check-ins and the *Youth Truth* survey. School administration and counselors support students in and outside the classroom by performing restorative justice circles as needed. Counselors also provide students with individual counseling, group counseling, as well as whole class lessons and assemblies on various topics.
- Rio hosts a parent workshop, *Healthy Mind, Healthy Body*, to educate parents about mental and emotional health. Ventura County Behavioral Health provides resources for accessing mental health services. The school partners with Interface Children and Family Services for the children's personal safety program, *My Body Belongs to Me*. Students also attend an interactive assembly on healthy eating and active living in partnership with Kaiser Permanente.

### **Pillar III: Provide Effective Environmental and Sustainability Education**

#### *Element IIIA: Interdisciplinary Learning*

- Rio is focused on environmental literacy, as outlined in the following mission statement: "An environmentally literate person can act individually and with others to support ecologically sound, economically prosperous, and equitable communities for present and future generations. Through lived experiences and education programs that include classroom-based lessons, experiential education, and outdoor learning, students will become environmentally literate, developing the knowledge, skills, and understanding of environmental principles to analyze environmental issues and make informed decisions."

- The district prioritizes environmental literacy and outdoor education in its Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). These goals result from collaboration with parents and interested parties throughout the district community. The district defines its commitment with the following District LCAP priorities:
  - Develop inviting, practical, and long-lasting outdoor spaces on school campuses and provide opportunities for students to attend off-site field experiences with environmentally focused community partners.
  - Increase and expand health and wellness through outdoor learning opportunities and presentations, which improve students' emotional, intellectual, and behavioral development, including the following:
    - Outdoor gardens, coordination of environmental education, and farm-to-school programs for nutritional wellness.
    - Science and environmental-based field trips.
    - Health and wellness classes and parent education support.
- Rio's schools incorporate California's Next Generation Science Standards (CA-NGSS) Environmental Principles and Concepts (EP&Cs) in classrooms and afterschool programs across the district. There are several examples of projects and units of study involving the intersection of humans with the environment and their interdependency with local and global ecosystems, including the following:
  - All schools have gardens and a dedicated garden educator who incorporates garden lessons into the classrooms, highlighting how food gets from the farm to the table and how people depend on and influence factors around food supply and nutrition.
  - First-grade students at Rio Real participate in a protest march throughout campus to advocate for environmental causes such as reducing pollution and animal conservation and to promote love and respect for the planet as a culminating activity for their yearlong study on animal biodiversity.
  - In 2019, third-grade students at Rio del Sol studied native plants and their uses in indigenous cultures. Students created a botany guide with the plants' needs to grow and applications in culinary arts, medicine, and construction. The students also collaborated with two district artists to design and paint a mural on campus that incorporated their appreciation and knowledge of native plants, the Chumash culture, and the local community.
  - Annually, an average of 20 kindergarten through eighth-grade classes participate in local environmental education through the *Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains* (RCDSMM) using both virtual programming and school visits. RCDSMM also visited approximately 24 classes from 2021 to 2023 for summer programming to teach students about nature journaling and local environmental issues.
  - Fifth-grade students at Rio Del Sol STEAM Academy (Rio Del Sol) and Rio Lindo Elementary study the local rivers and their ecosystems and how human impact has affected the river systems over time, focusing on invasive plants and infrastructure.
  - In January 2023, Ventura Wild took groups of Rio Plaza students in the afterschool program on weekly field trips focusing on the local river systems and watersheds. In the 2023–24 school year, Ventura Wild worked with all second-grade students in the afterschool programs at Rio Real, Rio Plaza, and Rio Lindo.

- Since 2018, fourth-grade students at Rio Real have participated in the Monterey Bay Climate Conference and presented research on the use and effects of plastic utensils at their school site, resulting in a district-wide change in food packaging and presentation in food services.
- Second-grade students at Rio Del Sol study the watershed's local topography and observe how erosion and weathering impact the local watershed over time.
- In 2021, eighth-grade students at Rio del Valle presented research and solutions to their community on climate change factors driven by the exponential growth in human population across the globe.
- In 2023, all sixth-grade classrooms partnered with California State University Channel Islands to study sustainable protein sources. Students designed investigations to determine which variables caused mealworms to grow the most. Students studied the climate impact of growing, raising, and farming meat. They learned about alternative sources of protein from other cultures and how eating less meat in general could benefit the environment.
- The district emphasizes hands-on, inquiry-based, and experiential approaches, integrating environmental and sustainability concepts across disciplines. Examples of ecological academic programs include:
  - The Rio Regenerative Farm: Outdoor classrooms at each school engage students in regenerative farming practices, contributing to a healthy environment and food system.
  - *Compost Tea Party*: All district students participate in events focusing on soil health, beneficial bugs, compost-making, and understanding the impact of pesticides on plants and water runoff.
  - Garden programs: All sites use the *LifeLab* curriculum and have a teacher on special assignment (TOSA) to engage students in lessons aligned with state standards. On-site, garden educators teach classes in the garden four days a week. The science TOSA and nutrition and garden educators have aligned units of instruction to include lessons that garden educators run as part of the core science program. The integrated curriculum includes ethnobotany.
- Since 2015, the Inquiry-Based Instructional Designers (IBID), a group founded by the district's teachers, has hosted curriculum design sessions led by teachers and outside experts, with continuous participation from 90 educators and counselors. Curriculum topics include ethnobotany, native plants, remedies, and sustainability projects, with sessions led by experts on gardening as a resource across disciplines.
- The district employs a farm-to-school coordinator and FoodCorps service members to model lessons for garden teachers in nutrition-based education and cooking, along with a contracted garden and nutrition educator, focusing on middle school lessons and serving as the outdoor educator at the Rio Regenerative Farm.
- Rio fosters environmental and sustainability student clubs dedicated to addressing environmental and sustainability issues across various school sites. Notable examples include:
  - The *Pollinator Habitat Garden* at Rio Real Dual Immersion Academy (Rio Real), initiated with fourth graders, has evolved into an afterschool club with a group of second through seventh-grade students. Established in 2015, the club designs and maintains the area, collaborating with the Department of Fish and Wildlife to expand it with fruit trees. Presentations from the local Ojai Raptor Preserve enhance students' knowledge.

- The *City Corps Club* at Rio Real engaged second through fifth-grade students in projects related to campus beautification, neighborhood clean-ups, and soccer field maintenance, involving around 60 kids annually from 2017 through 2020.
- The *City Corps Club* at Rio Lindo has focused on gardening since 2017, planting trees to address climate change. The club of fifth-grade students conducts weekly campus cleanup days for litter abatement, reducing pollution, and runs a recycling program.
- Rio Vista Middle School (Rio Vista) hosts the *Coastal Cleanup Club*, participating in *Ventura Coast Coast Cleanup Day* since 2016, with 15-30 children, families, and teachers involved. The *Garden Club* at Rio Vista allows students to work in gardens and learn about ecosystems.
- Rio del Norte Elementary (Rio del Norte) Garden Club students work in the garden during lunch, educating peers about composting, pollinators, and garden maintenance.
- The district supports field trips and place-based learning. Rio encourages teachers to shift towards local community-based excursions to help students become stewards of their local habitats, rivers, and coastal land. Sustainability and environmental literacy-focused field trips for various grades include:
  - Transitional kindergarten and kindergarten students go to Underwood Farms to study what plants need to thrive and to the Wolf Museum of Exploration + Innovation to study motion and stability.
  - First-grade students visit the Santa Barbara Zoo to learn about animal biology and habitats.
  - Second-grade students study plant growth cycles at the Santa Paula Agricultural Museum and study biodiversity at the Santa Barbara Botanic Gardens.
  - Third-grade students go to the Ventura County Museum to learn about change over time and participate in Students for Eco-Education and Agriculture (SEEAg) to learn about artificial selection.
  - Fourth-grade students visit Harmon Canyon to study weathering, erosion, and Chumash culture and participate in RCDSMM at the Malibu Lagoon.
  - Fifth-grade students visit Wishtoyo Conservancy to learn about the Channel Islands ecosystem interactions.
  - Sixth-grade students explore the coast to study human impact and participate in the *SEEAg Agricultural Career Day* to learn about plant reproduction, pollination, and genetics.

### ***Element IIIB: STEM Content, Knowledge, and Skills***

- Within the district, specific instructional initiatives seamlessly integrate environmental education and stewardship with project-based learning, incorporating interdisciplinary programs in STEAM. Illustrative instances of these academic programs and projects include the following:
  - Marine Science Summit & Marine Study (Rio Real): Integrated marine science study involving student participation in the Monterey Bay Climate Conference.
  - Oxnard Beautification Project (Merito Academy): Students engage in restorative design, planting, and community revitalization, incorporating ocean environmental education.

- Anti-plastics campaigns: Student activism addressing plastic waste, resulting in district-wide changes such as eliminating plastic straws and using a single spork.
- Indigenous Study (Rio del Sol and Rio Real): Explores native plants, Santa Clara River ecosystems, trout habitat, and Chumash environmental values, culminating in community activism projects.
- *Future Cities* projects: Students engage in projects across disciplines and address current environmental issues in a design context.
- Río Del Sol, established in 2018 with a focus on STEAM, incorporates architecture and landscaping designed to harmonize with the environment and honor the indigenous roots of the site. The school integrates sciences, arts, engineering, and environmental education to facilitate interdisciplinary learning that explores the vital relationships between dynamic environmental, energy, and human systems and the local surroundings.
- The *Mathematics, Engineering, and Science Achievement (MESA)* program is offered in all middle schools in partnership with the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). The program provides academic enrichment and college exposure to first-generation college middle and high school students as part of the academic preparation efforts of the University of California, Office of the President. UCSB's MESA College Prep Program works with teachers who serve as advisors, offering students support in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) subject areas through hands-on, problem-solving projects and challenges.
- In 2021, the district appointed a Science TOSA to assist teachers in enhancing the existing curriculum with environmental literacy. The following outlines the content studied by grade level:
  - In kindergarten through second grade, an emphasis is placed on the interdependence of humans with the environment, fostering communication of solutions to mitigate human impact on land, air, and living things. For example, students participate in the *Compost Tea Party*, enriching the soil with natural fertilizer.
  - In third through fifth grade, lessons explain the costs and benefits of energy and fuels from natural resources and explore their environmental effects. Students develop projects with strategies to reduce human impact by minimizing waste and reducing their carbon footprint. For example, Rio Real fourth-grade students held a climate summit to present their solutions.
  - In sixth through eighth grade, lessons focus on questioning factors leading to the Earth's rising temperatures, the impact of human population growth, and the depletion and unequal distribution of natural resources. Students design methods to monitor and minimize human impact. For example, Rio Del Valle and Rio Real students create submissions on *The Problem with Plastics* for the *Rio School District Art Show*.
- Schools organize family science nights to showcase potential STEAM career pathways for family members and students. Since 2020, the district has hosted virtual family science nights featuring STEAM professionals, such as an agricultural manager discussing her STEAM-related role at a local strawberry farm.
- Rio offers numerous pathways to explore green careers, including the following:
  - The MESA program participates in the United Nations *17 Sustainability Goals* in its yearly *National Design Engineering Challenge* and exposes students to diverse career paths.



- Middle school students participating in the *Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)* program explore various STEAM career pathways.
- The *Girls STEAM Club* at Rio del Valle meets weekly, providing opportunities to attend presentations by local STEAM professionals, especially those in green technology. For example, club members met with the district's new regenerative farmer at the farm adjacent to campus to discuss the intersections of his work with green STEAM careers.
- The Rio District collaborates with California State University, Channel Islands (CSUCI), hosting an annual Science Carnival open to students, teachers, families, and community members. Teachers have access to resources, and students engage in STEAM outdoor activities with university students and professionals from partnership organizations, exploring various career pathways, including those related to environmental concepts and sustainability.
- The district purchased *Climate Action Kits* from Forward Education to be incorporated into the middle school robotics courses, *Girls STEM (science, technology, and math) Club*, and Summer Technology and Science Academies. The district plans to incorporate the kits into the third through eighth-grade science curriculum. The kits present real-world climate change issues as opportunities for learners to explore and create STEM solutions using the coding and robotics kit and online learning platform. Examples of student projects include building self-monitoring watering systems, wind turbines, and solar-powered vehicles.
- The Rio Regenerative Farm features an outdoor classroom integrating regenerative farming practices and green career skills. In partnership with Oxnard Union High School District (OUHSD) and California State University Channel Islands, the Agriculture Center offers hospitality management and Agriculture classes, fostering internships and career technical education (CTE) pathways in agriculture and culinary fields. The middle school garden and nutrition courses, featuring events like *Meet the Farmer*, emphasize green career pathways. A virtual map on the Rio website guides students and families through various agricultural career pathways, starting at the district and branching into OUHSD, local junior colleges, and university systems.

### *Element IIIC: Civic Knowledge and Skills*

- Students across the District participate in civic and community engagement projects. Many classes explore 'driving questions' that support students in becoming agents of change in their communities and the world. For example, middle school students in AVID programs at Rio Vista and Rio del Valle participate in community service projects such as beach clean-ups.
- The school district has teamed up with Junior City Corps to offer students opportunities to positively contribute to their local communities. Fifth-grade students at Rio Lindo and Rio Real have participated in various projects, including removing litter from their school neighborhoods, planting trees, maintaining the school garden, organizing recycling projects, and participating in other events.
- Fourth-grade students at Rio Real participate in the *Monterey Bay Aquarium Summits*, culminating in service-learning opportunities. For the 2022–23 season, Rio Real students focused on service learning around plastic pollution. In past years, students have conducted plastic use surveys on campus, which resulted in a proposal to the School Board to reduce plastics in the cafeteria. The Board approved the students'

request as they gave evidence and data to show that the change would reduce waste and save money.

- Since 2018, Rio has partnered with the *Pesticide Free Soil Project* and other community organizations such as the Ventura Land Trust, The Friends of the Santa Clara River, Once Upon a Watershed, and others to host a *Compost Tea Party* at different school sites in the district. The main activity involves students spreading the compost tea fertilizer, made by steeping compost in water and containing beneficial microorganisms and nutrients promoting plant health and soil fertility, across the school grounds to fertilize and nourish the landscape. These events host educational booths and stations to educate participants on using natural dyes and beneficial pests. Students are also involved in booths where they can educate others on the importance of composting or sorting trash at lunch.
- The district implements hands-on, place-based environmental education projects with service-learning components, fostering local ecological literacy. Notable initiatives include the following:
  - *Trout in the Classroom Program* - This program lets students raise trout from eggs to fingerlings in a cold-water aquarium while learning about data collection, water analysis, ecosystem balance, and math. They release their fish during a field trip to Lake Casitas and learn about the Matilija Dam's impact on the trout population.
  - Condor Conservation and Advocacy - Rio engages with the Los Padres National Forest Watch to conserve condors. Students participate in field experiences, removing lead shotgun shells to protect condors. Additionally, Rio students partner with the Nature Conservancy to remove invasive plants from the Santa Clara River, promoting native plant restoration during the 5th-grade field experience.
  - Partnership with Friends of the Santa Clara River - Rio collaborates with this organization, aligning units of study in classrooms with a field study at the Ventura Harbor and estuary. Students explore local indigenous culture, engage in environmental stewardship, and participate in activities such as beach clean-ups and native plant restoration.
- In 2018, third-grade students at Rio Del Sol engaged in a year-long study of the Chumash, focusing on protecting steelhead trout in the Santa Clara River watershed. The students hosted a City of Oxnard community meeting, where they performed a play featuring insights from community members, including the principal and the Oxnard mayor. Approximately 90 students presented their findings and recommendations to the community. The project concluded with the co-authoring and production of a book containing their research and recommendations for the city's assistance in trout preservation.
- The district actively promotes the showcasing of Rio District student presenters at diverse conferences, with established participation in events at CSUCI, the IBID Institute, the Ventura County Chapter of the California Association for Bilingual Educators, and the Rio Thrive conference. These presentations cover topics like indigenous transdisciplinary lessons with an environmental focus, offering students opportunities to showcase their projects and advocate for change in their communities.
- Rio Real is partnering with Merito Academy to complete the *Oxnard Beautification Project* for the 2023–24 school year. Students provide input in restorative design and planting options to inform community planting, support clean-up events, and revitalize

the City of Oxnard community parks. The program also includes ocean environmental education in the classroom from scientists at Merito Academy.

- Students actively sort food waste during lunch, a practice established before the global pandemic and recently intensified due to city regulations and composting support. Each school site has implemented systems to educate students on sorting food waste for recycling, composting, and landfill. Currently, five sites successfully operate this sorting system daily. The district, collaborating with food services, aims to expand the program to all sites through outreach efforts and the establishment of food waste ambassadors, with crucial support from FoodCorps service members at each site.
- Rio offers impactful outdoor experiences for students spanning various grades. Fifth-grader students visit Santa Cruz Island annually to explore food webs and the human-environment relationship. In the Summer Science Academy, seventh and eighth-grade students conduct fieldwork on Santa Cruz Island, partnering with park rangers and Friends of the Santa Clara River for coastal exploration aligned with units on watersheds and coastal ecosystems. Additionally, students participate in nature journaling activities with the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains.
- Faculty and students at Rio regularly integrate various subjects through outdoor learning on their local sites. This integration includes outdoor walks, biodiversity studies, utilizing outdoor spaces for art projects, and reading/writing in outdoor settings. The district tri-annually facilitates river and ocean field trips, fostering consistent seasonal observations. These experiences, which are part of their transdisciplinary units, lead to student advocacy at the site level and in the broader community.
- Rio collaborates with Ventura County Water Works (VCWW). This organization manages the Santa Clara River through the Rio River Literacy Project, as well as the construction of the Rio del Sol school. Rio is participating in a joint project with the Army Corp of Engineers to build a river walk and wash-awayable amphitheater. Rio is also involved in rebuilding the levee, protecting the community from the 100-year flood. This partnership involves students when VCWW officials guide field trips and lead instruction involving the Santa Clara River.
- Rio hosts an annual *Plaza Produce Party*, a Farm to School celebration focused on the school garden, whole food cooking, local farmers, and the organic food they grow for school lunches. Families participate in a school garden tour, whole food cooking lesson, free organic farm stand, and smoothie making and tasting.
- Rio collaborates with several organizations to enrich environmental education and sustainability initiatives, including the following:
  - Resource Conservation District of Santa Monica Mountains (RCDSMM) visits schools to provide classroom lessons and summer programming on nature journaling and gardening.
  - Students for Eco-Education and Agriculture (SEEAG) provide middle school assemblies and guest speakers for Summer Science Academy.
  - The University of California Hanson Center also provides middle school assemblies and guest speakers for Summer Science Academy.
  - Friends of the Santa Clara River offers coastal explorations, fieldwork, and ongoing efforts to expand opportunities to additional school sites.
  - Rio Vista students organize coastal cleanup events and participate in Ventura County Coastal Cleanup.
  - The CSUCI contributes to the annual science carnival and conference presentations by CSUCI science professor Phil Hampton.

- Ventura County Waterworks collaborates on the River Literacy Project and construction projects and provides field trip guidance.
- National Parks provide the *WriteOut* program for outdoor writing, with prompts and collaboration opportunities with other classrooms.
- Los Padres National Forest hosts field trips related to the Santa Clara River Watershed and environmental experiences.
- The Fish and Wildlife Department supports gardening, native habitat, and information on trout for classroom projects.
- The Pesticide Free Soil Project supports the Compost Tea Party with environmental education on sustainable farming and gardening.
- From the Center for Regenerative Agriculture, Dr. David White promotes regenerative agriculture techniques.
- Rincon-Vitova Insectaries promote organic pest control using beneficial insects.
- Chumash elders collaborate on curriculum and programming for environmental stewardship.
- The UCSB provides STEM professionals and research presentations in the River Literacy Project.
- Ojai Raptor Center provides school-visit lessons for students and provides raptors for pest control.
- FoodCorps Garden and Nutrition educators teach students to grow, cook, appreciate nourishing foods, and support child nutrition services.
- Rio partnered with Rescape California, a nonprofit that educates about and advocates for a whole-systems regenerative approach to landscaping, to apply for the Urban Greening Grant through the California Natural Resources Agency. The grant aims to help the district fund landscaping projects at Rio Plaza that reduce greenhouse gases while transforming the built environment into more sustainable, enjoyable, and healthy spaces in creating vibrant communities. This new partnership results from Rio's expanding network, partly due to receiving the 2023 California Green Ribbon Schools award.
- Rio's superintendent spearheads the River Literacy Project (RLP), a transdisciplinary global learning initiative connecting students, teachers, and communities worldwide. The project centers around the question, "How can we guide the river's course for the next 100 years?" Participants actively develop various literacies—reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, science, history, culture, and technology. Rio invites teachers, river enthusiasts, and experts globally to collaborate virtually, contributing to the well-being of rivers and all species.