

## **THE NEIGHBORHOOD TREE PROJECT AT PS 45 STATEN ISLAND**

In the Spring of 2003 the the Neighborhood Tree Project concept was introduced to teachers at PS 45 in West Brighton, Staten Island.

The Neighborhood Tree Project was funded through the Forest Service's Urban and Community Forestry Program (Title VIII) to focus on how neighborhood tree data can be collected by community partners, enhanced through computer mapping and analysis, and returned to the public through the OASIS maps. Street trees were surveyed in summer 2002 by adult Citizen Pruners in selected communities in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island. Data collected included location, height, canopy size and height to crown, diameter at breast height (DBH), foliage density, tree age, condition, surveyor names and the date. Information was also collected about the tree pit.

Individual tree locations were plotted on maps enabling OASIS web users to click on a tree to find out its species, height, condition, and environmental & health benefits.

The Neighborhood Tree Project at PS 45 in West Brighton, Staten Island was trying to determine whether elementary school age children could perform the same tasks, whether such a project had value and how to deal with the logistical issues involved.

Initially, Lenny Librizzi of the Council on the Environment of New York City, who was part of the team that created the Neighborhood Tree Project, met with a third grade teacher, Kim Colbeck, and a parent Deirdre Armitage, who was assisting with curricula resources to discuss the idea and if it would be a valuable project to attempt. Subsequently this group met with additional 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade teachers to discuss how such a project might be implemented at the school. In an additional hands-on session, the teachers used the tools and collected data.

Mr. Librizzi also gave a brief presentation to Kim Colbeck's class on tree identification using leaves and demonstrated the use of the measuring tools including a Biltmore stick (to measure tree height and height to canopy), a rolling tape measure for measuring long distances (the surveyor has to be 66 feet away from the tree to measure height) and a diameter tape measure. The concept of foliage density was introduced and the children were asked to use the estimating skills that they had learned in their math lessons.

In June, Ms. Colbeck and an assistant took the children outside to do the surveying. She reflects, "We were very excited about the project. To begin with, trees are fun to investigate. Kids are already familiar with their leaves, seeds and more obvious features, but they don't often realize that trees have names and ages just like we do, and that we can collect clues to figure out these mysteries.

Although I had attended an in-school workshop about the OASIS project, and prepared the children for the investigation by having them notice their neighborhood trees and bring in some leaves and seeds, it really helped to have Mr. Librizzi visit our class. His

explanations and demonstrations of the tools generated a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm.

While I initially saw this project as a way to reinforce the math skills of estimating and multiplying in a real-life situation, there are so many opportunities to connect this work to other parts of your curriculum. The math and science connections might be obvious, but we worked in literacy, too. I collected several books from the library, both fiction and non-fiction, and built our read-alouds around the topic of trees. These books were then available to the kids during independent reading. Some children began using their writer's notebooks to record observations about local trees, and some were writing short stories and poems about them. The possibilities really are endless.

Three suggestions that I might offer to ensure a smooth project include enlisting adult help, visiting the targeted trees ahead of time, and giving yourself plenty of time. If you do this as a whole-group activity, you'll need another adult to supervise the non-measuring kids as they wait their turn. It's also a good idea to visit the neighborhood ahead of time to think through where to put your students and to let the neighbors know what you'll be doing. Finally, give yourself lots of time. It's better to measure two trees well than to try for five trees and end up feeling stressed. Your class, too, will enjoy it more if it's spread out over several days."

As reflected in Ms. Colbeck's comments, Elementary school age children can perform the tree surveying tasks with some preparation and pre-planning. This project has opportunities to connect to Math and Science as well as other parts of the elementary school curriculum. The logistical issues can be formidable but not insurmountable.

The class collected data on 6 trees which Mr. Librizzi verified for accuracy. The tree locations and data collected by the students can now be viewed on OASIS. In spring of 2004 additional classes will be invited to participate in this project and instructional materials for teachers will be created.