



## U.S. Secretary of Education Names Little Tree Huggers LLC from Leesburg, VA a 2023 U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon School

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The U.S. Department of Education announced today that Little Tree Huggers Preschool in Leesburg, VA is among the 2023 U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools award honorees.

Little Tree Huggers (LTH) Preschool <https://www.littletreehuggersllc.com> was nominated by the Virginia Department of Education as the National Capital Region's first bilingual nature-based preschool dedicated specifically to breaking down barriers to sustainability in all areas of society. Founded in 2015, LTH's mission is to inspire children, their families, and even local businesses to connect with nature, care for the environment, and celebrate the diversity of our multicultural world. As early as 2016, LTH started being recognized by the community for its dedication and commitment to environmental education and innovative sustainability practices. In addition to implementing a comprehensive nature-based, bilingual curriculum, that has children outdoors rain or shine 75% of the day, LTH established a wildlife sanctuary around a fully restored, 3 acre, mid-nineteenth-century farm complex which has been recognized by the Loudoun Nature Conservancy, the Audubon Society, and the National Wildlife Federation, for its extensive wildlife habitat, pollinator gardens, monarch way station, and stormwater detention and riparian conservation areas; all of which have been planted and maintained over the years by students, staff and parents. Students at LTH learn the importance of environmental stewardship by participating daily in all aspects of farm operations, from cleaning the chicken coop and large animal stalls to harvesting eggs, replenishing water, and feeding LTH's rescue ponies, alpacas, goats, lambs, and pigs. They compost daily and learn about the life cycles of the various animals and plants they encounter on regular nature walks. Each Spring students work the compost they have prepared into the school's vegetable and flower gardens. They plant seeds for the next crop and tend the garden through harvest. They also harvest pears, apples, peaches, and other crops grown onsite and participate in making meals and preserves with the various items they have harvested. LTH also set the example by installing geothermal heating and cooling, an extensive 48 panel solar array, generating approximately 16,000 kWh of energy annually, and various other energy efficiency solutions making LTH proudly carbon neutral. This represents 60 tons of CO2 emissions avoided, 900 trees planted and fully grown, 135,000 miles not driven, and 6,000 gallons of fuel not used since installation of the system. LTH's environmental impact is among the lowest in the area; with 90% of all play and outdoor instructional areas built with repurposed or recycled materials, 80% of all classroom projects made with repurposed or recycled materials, and with all food waste composted onsite. Families and the local community are also encouraged to bring organic waste to LTH to be composted. In terms of Health and Wellness of Students and Staff, LTH remained open the entire coronavirus pandemic. As an essential enterprise, LTH immediately discovered the health benefits of having students outdoors 75% of the time, 11 ½ months out of the year. Masks were worn indoors per CDC guidelines during the pandemic and, based on the effectiveness in controlling the spread of all types of seasonal respiratory infections, continue to be worn voluntarily when the children are near each other indoors. To date, there have been no documented cases of transmission





of illness from child to child or child to staff since opening. As a result of the above, LTH was a Loudoun County Chamber of Commerce Sustainable Business Challenge Platinum Award Winner in 2016 and, in 2017, LTH received the Loudoun County Chamber of Commerce's top award: the Loudoun Sustainable Business Excellence Award! Recognizing the need for more environmental awareness, LTH became a founding member of the Virginia Green Initiative (VGI) <https://www.vgi.green> in 2018. VGI is a statewide initiative to encourage and promote a healthy and sustainable quality of life for all Virginians. LTH leverages its environmental and sustainability curriculum to conduct outreach to families and businesses, showcasing the incorporation of solar, geothermal, rainwater harvesting, and composting as well as underscoring the importance of reducing, reusing, and recycling to positively impact both the environment and one's pocketbook! LTH continued to be recognized in 2019, 2020 and 2021 at the state level with First Place Platinum and Innovation Awards from VGI! On April 19, 2023, LTH also received the Loudoun County Environmental Excellence Award in appreciation for protecting and preserving the environment of Loudoun County!

LTH Director Lia D. Johnson accepted these awards in the name of all the children, parents, families, and staff members that have made this achievement possible but emphasizes there is still much work to be done and challenges more families and businesses to do their part!

Across the country, 26 schools, 11 districts, and four postsecondary institutions are being honored for their innovative efforts to reduce environmental impact and utility costs, improve health and wellness, and ensure effective sustainability education. The honorees were named from a pool of candidates nominated by 18 states.

The list of all selected schools, districts, colleges, and universities, as well as their nomination packages, can be found [here](#). A report with highlights on the 41 honorees can be found [here](#) (See page 39 for a summary of LTH's achievements). More information on the federal recognition award can be found [here](#). Resources for all schools to move toward the three Pillars can be found [here](#).

#### **A Note on the Award Name for Communications**

ED's award is called "U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools" and has "District Sustainability Award" and "Postsecondary Sustainability Award" categories, in addition to the original school award. It is abbreviated ED-GRS. "Green Ribbon Schools" without the "U.S. Department of Education" is not ED's award, but instead is a separate program overseen by another organization. A selected school is a "2023 U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon School." There is no "National," "Award," or "Program" in the title. There is no apostrophe or hyphen after Education.

