

# Regional Centres of Expertise

on education for sustainable development

## RCE GRAND RAPIDS

### The region

The City of Grand Rapids, with a jurisdictional population of approximately 250,000 people, is the second largest City in Michigan. It is located in West Michigan, U.S.A., near the centre of the State's largest drainage basin, the Grand River watershed. This 1.4 million hectare drainage basin empties directly into Lake Michigan, the second largest of the Great Lakes. Together, the five Great Lakes contain more than 21% of the world's fresh water supply—only the polar ice caps contain more fresh water.

The Grand Rapids region is a mix of urban, suburban, and rural populations anchored by several large office furniture manufacturers (Steelcase, Herman Miller, and Haworth), Spectrum Health and the Alticor Corporation as its major employers. Grand Rapids is the health care centre of Western Michigan and is home to main or satellite campuses of 12 colleges or universities. The agricultural region supports a unique "fruit ridge" that runs inland along Lake Michigan and is prime land for fruit cultivation. Ottawa County, due west of the City, is known for its important agriculture and livestock production.

### Regional challenges

The West Michigan region faces a variety of sustainable development challenges, including:

- Management of sustainable urban growth
- Environmental preservation and protection
- Waste management
- Energy and water conservation
- Private and public transportation and infrastructure
- Evolving industrial sectors and workforce
- Creation of sustainable infrastructure in the core city
- Poverty eradication
- Reduction of social inequity
- Education
- Safety

As the region continues to grow as a result of its high quality of life, sprawl threatens its agricultural heritage, diminishes its capacity to support high-quality public services, generates increasing impacts on ecosystem services, and threatens its precious natural assets—especially the much-adored Lake Michigan.



### Regional role

RCE Grand Rapids will continue to create significant partnerships in the community that support and practice sustainable development and coach the concepts of triple bottom line considerations in planning and problem-solving efforts. The RCE will infuse ESD practices and techniques in all aspects of the community to build life-long learning opportunities. The RCE will re-create systems thinking and learning concepts in an effort to tie together the community with a common thread. Because of its position in the West Michigan region and the Great Lakes watershed, Grand Rapids will influence and lead others in sustainable development as it showcases its own economic growth, social equity, and environmental stewardship created from the practice of its own sustainable development practices.

### Organizations involved

The City of Grand Rapids, Grand Rapids Public Schools, Grand Rapids Community College, Grand Valley State University, the West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum, the West Michigan Strategic Alliance, and Aquinas College are a few of the agencies that have joined the Community Sustainability Partnership. There are at present over 100 other agencies and organizations signed onto the partnership that will participate in the various on-going community educational activities through the decade.

### Decision-making structure

The Grand Rapids RCE has developed from an existing Community Sustainability Partnership (CSP), a 100-member network which already includes participants from four key stakeholder groups: members of formal, non-formal, and informal education organizations; providers of ESD content; supporters of ESD delivery; students and life-long learners of all ages.

## Goals of the RCE

The overarching vision of the RCE is to make sustainable development a visible reality to all citizens through making ESD become second nature.

Short-term objectives for 2007 include:

- establishing a guiding framework for visioning a sustainable Grand Rapids,
- building community awareness and sharing best practices regarding the importance of ESD,
- creating a sustainable education handbook & curriculum response to state standards,
- developing and measuring meaningful community sustainability indicators in collaboration with other agencies and organizations, and
- establishing a viable working relationship with the U.S. Partnership for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development

Long-term objectives for the period 2008-2014 include:

- measurable improvements in the community's economy, social capital, and environment,
- increased public understanding of and engagement in the work of the RCE,
- more diverse representation in the community at all levels,
- effective and proven systems and strategies for delivering ESD content through community sustainability planning activities in all stakeholder sectors,
- institutionalized ESD programs in all education sectors and at all levels from K-12, to higher education, to life-long learning, and
- databases and resources for sharing sustainability best practices in the private and public sectors.

## Activities

The RCE is participating in and planning a broad variety of research and development and collaborative activities.

### RE-ORIENTING EDUCATION TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Several of the higher education institutions involved are building sustainability into their campus operations and into their curriculum. The RCE will continue to network with sustainability organizations to support and promote efforts to re-orient education toward sustainable development through consensus-building, healthy competition, research, and networking student groups.

### INCREASING ACCESS TO QUALITY BASIC EDUCATION

The RCE has been working with the Grand Rapids Public Schools to model a new high school that is aimed at recovering high school dropouts. The partnership is bringing together student teachers to help with instruction and mentoring and a professional researcher on urban education problems. The end goal of the partners is to find ways of introducing these students to work life in area businesses in an effort to eradicate poverty and depression by instilling hope and encouraging positive involvement in the community.

### DELIVERING TRAINING PROGRAMS

The RCE is exploring the creation of a green purchasing consortium to find and make accessible, products that are designed and built around sustainability principles. Compostable food service items, recycled paper, re-manufactured office furniture, and electronics are just a few of the early examples that are under consideration. The RCE is also working with the health services community to establish the Children's Environmental Health Initiative (CEHI), which is a collaboration of public health, education, government, and business, whose mission is to provide educational materials and information about environmental health hazards in the home and community.

### LEADING ADVOCACY AND AWARENESS RAISING EFFORTS

The RCE has begun to raise awareness in the area's faith-based communities as places of worship begin to consider their role as both users of energy and resources and their responsibility to participate in education for sustainable development. The CSP will host four summits during 2007, the fourth Summit will be focusing on the Community Sustainability Indicators data to tie in with the other three Summits for the year.

### GRAND RAPIDS BRIDGE



## For more information

Cortland V. Overmyer  
Manager, Grand Rapids Sustainability Initiative  
300 Monroe NW  
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49503, U.S.A.  
+1-616-456-4636  
covermye@grcity.us

Dr. Harold Glasser  
Associate Professor  
Environmental Studies and Environmental Institute  
Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008, U.S.A  
+1-269-387-2713  
harold.glasser@wmich.edu

For more information on Education for Sustainable Development and the RCE Initiative, contact the Global RCE Service Centre at [rceservicecentre@ias.unu.edu](mailto:rceservicecentre@ias.unu.edu) or visit [www.ias.unu.edu/efsd](http://www.ias.unu.edu/efsd).