



Tapiztree

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Tapiztree is a high school student-led environmental activist group formed in spring 2021 in Miami-Dade County when students returned to campus after the pandemic shutdowns. We felt that the pandemic showed the importance of school campuses and how interconnected mental and physical health and learning are with equitable access to nature.

We started Tapiztree to help

students take the lead in “greening up” Miami-Dade County Public Schools (MDCPS) campuses, especially in low-to-moderate-income neighborhoods. Our Organizing Committee (OC) includes students from seven different area high schools. We are working with students on roughly a dozen campuses throughout Miami-Dade County to apply varied methods—community-building, art, science, advocacy, design, and ecology—to transform campuses into

“Casas de Biophilia.” (We love diversity in people, methods, and languages!)

Facing Obstacles

We’ve encountered some obstacles. MDCPS is the fourth-largest school district in the country, so bureaucratic issues exist: some principals are reluctant to approve projects—like setting up air quality monitoring devices (even when donated!) or adding plants to

interior areas (cost, upkeep, humidity?)—unless they get an okay from higher-ups. We didn’t have the political clout to convince the School Board to include a biophilic commitment in last year’s Clean Energy Task Force report, which would have created a mandate for change. We know we need to build our advocacy capacity.

Building Support

We are building key relationships to make sure there is MDCPS support for ongoing activities. School Board Member Lucia Baez-Geller, a former high school teacher, has guided and encouraged us at every step. She’s amazing! MDCPS Sustainability Officer Karly Pulido, who starting in September 2022, is a key partner. Director of Design Erick Laventure coordinated our first webinar, and Tim Beatley helped by explaining biophilia and the work of the Biophilic Cities Network.

Mayor Daniella Levine Cava has been inspirational in moving Miami-Dade County government forward on sustainability issues. Tapiztree has received information and support from the County’s Resilience Director Jim Murley, Interim Heat Director Jane Gilbert, and Communications Officer Brenda Krebs.

We’ve gotten the most day-to-day support from two community groups—Advocacy Partners Team (APT) and People’s Economic and Environmental Resiliency Group (PEER). We believe it is important for students to build a network

that includes school district staff, elected officials, and community groups because student leaders change every year; a support infrastructure is needed.

Making Progress

We think of our work as happening on three levels: people, project, and policy. We need to recruit and keep students involved; continuously build skills and knowledge; help students carry out projects at their own schools; and support policy change at the district and city/county levels. We’ve made progress in each area:

- We advocated for Miami-Dade County to join the Biophilic Cities Network, a move Mayor Levine Cava supported, and the County joined.
- Our OC has representatives from seven high schools in MDCPS, and our members come from more than a dozen different high schools.

Recently, students from Broward County in Florida and Davidson County in Tennessee also joined our WhatsApp chat and online meetings. On some campuses, we work primarily with environmental club members; while on other campuses, leaders in mental health clubs are active in encouraging the creation of mental health rooms with biophilic design elements.

- We’re slowly making biophilic education a reality in MDCPS. In early 2022, we were recognized for advocacy by the MDCPS School Board. Now, together with Board Member Baez-Geller, Sustainability Officer Pulido, and Miami-based architects ArquitectonicaGEO, Tapiztree is co-leading a pilot field trip, taking students from several high schools to the Lakeside Villages area at the University of Miami. Students will learn about the value of human-



nature interactions and do a “scavenger hunt” to identify biophilic design elements at Lakeside Villages. A panel with representatives from MDCPS, ArquitectonicaGEO, the University of Miami, and PEER will talk about how students can build biophilic “Green Campus” projects to bolster physical, emotional, aesthetic, and education experiences on all campuses. Tapiztree will then lead students in a project planning workshop.

- Tapiztree has kicked off its air quality monitoring project. Schools have been targeted by zip code for this a grassroots science project. Monitoring air quality is an issue of concern for environmental, racial, and economic justice.
- Tapiztree shares information and activities through our Instagram site: [@Tapiztree](https://www.instagram.com/tapiztree).

Last summer, OC members came together for a two-week writing intensive to write and illustrate a Student Guide to Green Campuses. The guide helps students understand biophilia and get creative about implementing biophilic projects in their own schools. We’re revising it this year and plan to distribute it more widely as a student-written reference.

Next Steps

This spring, an important goal is to bring new student-organizers into the OC to replace those who are graduating. We’re also hoping to work with the School Board to introduce a sustainability goal into the annual School Improvement Planning process.

And we’d love to connect with students from communities throughout the Biophilic Cities

Network! We’d like to help weave the threads of environmental justice and biophilic design more closely together – after all, our name is “tapiz,” Spanish for tapestry to reflect the diversity of South Florida, and “tree,” to reflect that nature is part of our diversity and our community. We seek a more verdant and equitable Miami, and we believe that students’ voices are vital in this endeavor.

Resources:

Tapiztree Group (@tapiztree). Working towards implementing biophilic design principles into Miami Dade County! <https://www.instagram.com/tapiztree>.

