

**Rotary**  
Club of  
Charlotte



# THIS WEEK'S SPEAKER

August 24, 2021

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## Edna Chirico, National Director of Government Affairs, OutTeach

By Elly Clary

"Imagine if every student came to school excited to learn every day," the vice-chair of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools board challenged Rotarians. "That's the power of outdoor learning," added Thelma Byers-Bailey.

Ms. Byers-Bailey supported a presentation by Charlotte's Edna Chirico, national director of Governmental Affairs for OutTeach. Ms. Chirico was joined by Susannah Koilpillai, the organization's Atlanta-based vice president for Partnerships & Growth.

Its mission is to educate secondary school students about the environment, with an emphasis on outdoor curriculum. It endeavors to transform elementary STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) education to make it more active and engaging.

Ms. Chirico established the Green Teacher Network in Mecklenburg County. It engaged more than 200 area schools, primarily in economically disadvantaged areas, in schoolyard gardening and nutritional education. The Green Teacher Network merged with OutTeach in 2016. OutTeach operates in the District of Columbia and six states, including North Carolina and Charlotte.

"To fill the STEM pipeline, we have to get started in the elementary schools," said Ms. Koilpillai. "Children are determining their career trajectories by sixth grade." Yet many elementary teachers are generalists, she added, and are uncomfortable teaching science.

OutTeach works primarily with teachers in Title I schools, reaching underprivileged children from lower-income backgrounds. “It’s very important for kids to know they can grow up to be a scientist or an engineer,” she said, “but we have to show them early on.”

Ms. Koilpillai and Ms. Chirico outlined the three-pronged approach OutTeach stresses to promote STEM instruction:

- Integrating science into math and language lessons.
- Training teachers in real-world, student-driven learning.
- Using the outdoors for immersive, hands-on learning.

“We know from national statistics that outdoor learning has to be a huge component in our education scenario,” said Ms. Chirico. It creates real-life experiences and improves attendance, engagement and academic performance as it aligns with science and math.

Introducing Ms. Chirico was Rotarian [Roger Sarow](#), a member of the OutTeach Carolinas board. But she pointed out that Charlotte Rotary has another connection to OutTeach. Five years ago, our Environmental Committee, chaired then by [Chase Saunders](#), supported her OutTeach predecessor that built native plant-pollinated gardens at 65 Title I schools in the Charlotte region.

OutTeach hopes to collaborate with the city of Charlotte and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Parks and Recreation Department. Walkable nature trails could connect outdoor learning gardens at elementary schools.

“It’s time to make the schools a community center again,” Ms. Chirico said.

She showed a video of community volunteers creating an outdoor learning center at Walter G. Byers School. Principal Anthony Calloway praised the effect it has had on elementary students – as the kids laughed and frolicked behind him.

Back to Ms. Byers-Bailey. Walter G. Byers School was named for her father, the principal of a predecessor school in the Greenville community.

“I have supported the partnership with OutTeach for many years,” Ms. Byers-Bailey said.

Wrapping up, Ms. Koilpillai said, “This is a moment in time when we have to hit the reset button on education. This is an opportunity to reengage our kids in learning, to inspire them, to get them excited to come to school every day.”

\*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/591759425>

The presentation begins at 25:25 minutes.