

Paving the Road for Community Engagement in a Garden Based Learning Program

Executive Summary

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Take a moment and visualize the school system as a river, with the students in rafts bobbing along. As they drift down the river, educators and school administrators are devising ways of interacting with them and ensuring no one gets lost in the shuffle. But while they are creating and building creative intervention techniques, the children are going to continue to move along the river. The time to engage and reach them is limited and fleeting. The purpose of this project was to initiate community support in an effort to support the efforts of the school principal in engaging with as many children as possible during the formative years of pre-kindergarten through 3rd grade.

Martin Luther King Early Education Center partnered with The Farm at South Mountain to expose their students through site tours to urban farming. From there, it was an easy decision to start a gardening program at the school itself. Both project partners believe that this is an effective tool to ignite a student's interest in STEM fields, as well as increase their exposure to healthy, fresh foods. And that can be achieved by something as simple as growing their own carrot. There is something special about seeing a carrot grow from a seed to a plant and nothing can beat the taste. After experiencing the taste difference of a store bought versus a garden grown carrot, student perspective really changes. We believe it builds confidence and expands what they believe they can do for themselves.

The children at the school are not only facing a future littered with marketing campaigns for processed and fast foods. There are underlying

issues of food security and access that impacts their daily lives. Every student at the school is enrolled in the free lunch program, the eligibility of which is determined by income level or receiving SNAP benefits. Access to healthy and fresh food options are further restricted by location, as the nearest grocery store is over 2 miles away. That is a long walk if a family has limited transportation options, especially if carrying a gallon of milk or a pound of potatoes. The walk would not be especially cool in the summer, as tree coverage is minimal and the various empty lots would serve as mini heat islands. Though these hurdles exist, there is opportunity for a successful learning garden but it requires a large community investment, in addition to school staff acceptance.

Utilizing several sustainability frameworks, this project sought to fill a resource gap through a triple engagement approach that encompassed the school, the parents and community organizations, and local businesses. By uniting these three population elements into one shared vision, it increased the odds of the long term viability of the garden program. Matt Waldman's 2018 MSUS project, *Cultivating Strategic Partnerships in Garden-Based Learning Martin Luther King Jr. Early Childhood Center and The Farm at South Mountain*, served as a foundational base for this project and inspiration for determining the end deliverables.

The project was able to engage several outside organizations to participate and dedicate time and money to the school program. By enlisting the support of the greater community, several necessary infrastructure needs, such as irrigation, milkweed plants and built square foot garden boxes, were able to be completed. The positive responses received from students, parents and teachers were shared with the sponsors.

Employing the school mascot, the Monarch butterfly, as a rallying emblem to ignite community interest in the garden space, we designed and built a pollinator garden that we were able to register with the Monarch Waystation Program. This dedicated space will serve as focal point for future school events and provide an element of uniqueness for the families to be proud of.

In order to combine the classroom learning with at home behaviors, each student received a square foot garden box to decorate and take home. Due to the efforts of the project team, all the students were able to decorate and take a box home at the end of the fall semester. This box provided an

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opportunity for the student to share with the rest of the family the skills being taught in classroom. For the project team, it presented a starting conversation point for the garden program expansion.

Due to the state of Arizona's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the project was halted midpoint as schools across the nation closed to ensure everyone's health and safety. As the duration of the quarantine closed, the best decision for the stressed teacher, administrators and parents was to pause all deliverables and regroup at the start of the next school year. The momentum and energy discovered through course of this project should still be viable, if not more so, as normal activities resume.

References

Waldman, Matthew. Cultivating Strategic Partnerships in Garden-Based Learning Martin Luther King Jr. Early Childhood Center and The Farm at South Mountain (2019). Web.