

Providing access to healthy foods through school gardens

Columbia Heights School District and Anoka County Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP)

Columbia Heights School District has a culturally diverse, highly-mobile school population. Because it is an urban environment, many students do not know how food is grown and processed, so the District chose to use a SHIP (State Health Improvement Program) grant they received to create an “Edible Schoolyard/Outdoor Classroom.” In addition to teaching students about good nutrition, the garden serves as a welcoming gathering place for students and the community.

How did this garden grow?

The project is overseen by the SHIP Committee, a collaboration of teachers, students, community members, and school administrators. The committee decided early in the process to develop one, district-wide, centrally-located, well-developed garden/outdoor classroom. The central location is within walking distance for a majority of the students. For students attending schools located farther away, the committee worked to provide a meaningful experience and participation through scheduled field trips to the garden and through composting and growing plants using grow lights.

The first year of the project focused on the infrastructure of the garden. Using the SHIP grant, other grant funds, and District funds, the District built a shed to house gardening tools, purchased tools and grow lights, and installed benches in the garden. Grants and District funding were also used to purchase seedlings and trees for the apple orchard. With the dedication of district staff and volunteers, the garden was in place in spring 2010 and had a very successful and productive growing season.

Students in a summer program spent time in the Edible Schoolyard/Outdoor Classroom, not only tending to the plants but also appreciating the beauty of the garden. District staff noted that many students

had never eaten a carrot fresh from the garden, and, in fact, many were unaware that carrots grew in the ground. Students who have experienced the garden are excited about gardening, are excited about eating produce that they have harvested, and are sharing their enthusiasm with their families. The District hopes that the enthusiasm for the garden project will translate into enthusiasm for eating healthy foods at home and throughout their lives.

How has the project addressed the needs of different cultural communities?

The diverse school district is made up of approximately one-third Latino students, one-third African American or African students, and one-third students who are Caucasian, Asian, or from other cultural backgrounds.

During the development of the Edible Schoolyard, District staff worked with representatives of the District’s wellness committee to select plants, placing an emphasis on culturally relevant foods. Their choices included lemongrass, peppers, tomatillos, cilantro, and more. District staff noted that it has been affirming to students and families to see the garden include foods they use at home. Staff also commented on the benefit of exposing students to foods from cultures other than their own.

What lessons learned may be helpful to other communities?

- **Identify a team with a clear leader.** To propel the garden from theory to reality, it has been essential to have an identified leader, someone able to shepherd the project throughout all stages of development. Equally important has been the recruitment of excited and skilled volunteers and staff, with both the dedication and knowledge to develop the garden.

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- **Take advantage of available community partners and resources.** As the District explored developing an Edible Schoolyard, staff reached out to the community. In particular, the District collaborated with the Anoka County Master Gardener Program. The District also identified resources from other districts with successful gardens.
- **Continue to promote the program's benefits.** To overcome the challenge of engaging teachers in the project, the District has worked diligently to integrate the Edible Schoolyard into existing curriculum. To ensure sustainability of the garden, the District continues to explore opportunities to present ideas for classroom integration to teaching staff.

What are the next steps for this initiative?

The Columbia Heights School District is exploring ways to further integrate the Edible Schoolyard into curricula at all levels, from elementary through high school. A graphic design class at the high school has taken responsibility for garden design. The District is also adding a botany class at the high school level. The class will take responsibility for ensuring the garden thrives.

MORE ABOUT THE FUNDING

The Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP) was signed into law in 2008 as an integral part of health care reform. The Anoka County Community Health and Environmental Services (CHES) department received a grant through the Minnesota Department of Health to create sustainable, systematic changes in schools that will combat the chronic disease risk factor of poor nutrition. Through this grant, Columbia Heights Public Schools was identified as a partner. The District received a grant of \$63,000 over a two-year period to establish an edible schoolyard.

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