

Wisconsin Farm to School success stories

Wausau: Thomas Jefferson Elementary School Garden



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In the fall of 2013, Wausau crossing guards went home with fresh-made pickles, and local residents opened their doors to bags full of vegetables following a resounding “ding-dong!” and a scampering of feet. The vegetables came with a note: “Compliments of Thomas Jefferson Elementary Garden.” The Ding-Dong-Ditch act was a Pay-it-Forward practice of the Thomas Jefferson Elementary (TJE) After-School Garden Club to show gratitude to the community that helped bring farm to school to life for students in the garden program.

The TJE garden sprouted in the spring of 2013, and achieved wild success in the first growing season. Renee Heinrich, TJE’s science teacher and an original champion of the garden, utilized the school’s 13 raised beds in both her school-day and after-school curriculum. Farm to school is woven into the very fabric of these lessons and activities. Students are introduced to new vegetables as they grow them, and their role as gardeners fosters a sense of pride and ownership. This culminates in more students tasting vegetables without skepticism. “Once the kale started sprouting, the kids would shout ‘Our kale is growing! Our kale is growing!’ They didn’t even know what it tasted like, they just knew the name and that it was theirs,” Heinrich said.

TJE’s garden is located in a previously underutilized courtyard – quite literally in the center of the school. Heinrich was determined to make the garden a central part of the curriculum, as well. All of the school’s 385 students take science from Heinrich, and all visit the garden. “I take them to the garden every single opportunity I get,” Heinrich said. “The door to my classroom goes to the garden. I’ve got a great opportunity to literally walk out my door into my bigger classroom.” Kindergartners discover senses in the Kinder-“Garden”, second graders study worms and composting, and fourth graders complete a unit on solar energy. Heinrich uses hands-on farm to school lessons such as those featured in the “Got Dirt?” and “Got Veggies?” garden curriculum guides, or she makes up her own. The gardening activities fit well with Heinrich’s current science curriculum, and prospects look good for integrating the garden with Next Generation Science Standards.

Students in after-school classes are at the very heart of TJE’s Homegrown Farm to School program. For six weeks every spring and six weeks every fall, Heinrich leads hour-long after-school sessions for second through fourth graders. These students have become the school’s Garden Club, and are proud of their role as “ambassadors to the garden.” In talking about the after-school gardening, Heinrich remarks that the kids are “trying new things all the time because they know it’s a safe environment... it’s something they can’t fail at, and they are all of a sudden engaged and excited. It gives them ownership and pride in their school and in themselves.”



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**– Renee Heinrich,
science teacher at
Thomas Jefferson
Elementary School
in Wausau**





It's no wonder Garden Club students feel a connection to the space. Not only do they have extended opportunities to plant, harvest, and cook with the produce (last year's creations ranged from pizza sauce to tea sandwiches with homemade herbal tea) they also use their new knowledge and experiences to educate others. Garden Club students will create the school's "Wisconsin Wednesday" video announcements this spring, featuring the school's Harvest of the Month fruit or vegetable.

Students wear their Garden Club t-shirts to school, and last year's experiences are not soon forgotten. "Our kids who were in the program last fall have already come up to me, saying 'Mrs. H., are we going to have Garden Club again?' They remember that excitement," Heinrich said, "and my goal is to get even more students involved this year."

Heinrich and her students have not been alone in bringing the garden to life, or in celebrating its success. The project seems to be a sort of magnet, drawing in farm to school grant funds, local business, and parent and community member involvement. For example, around the time that TJE was thinking of installing a garden, the Marathon County Health Department was awarded a Transform Wisconsin Grant to bolster farm to school efforts in local school districts. "Within one year, the grant helped the school (TJE) create a garden, integrate its use into curriculum and after-school programs, and become a major part of farm to school efforts," said Ashley Kienitz, the Public Health Educator brought on by the grant. Kienitz, who helps connect schools with farm to school resources, is currently focused on

making sure the program at TJE is sustainable once the two-year grant cycle is complete.

The garden grows creative energy and leadership development among students and community, and helps build a strong base of community support for future years. At the school's May "Plantapalooza", Garden Club students act as garden tour guides for visiting adults. Students also create their own business plans for selling specific vegetables at a Plantapalooza student farmers' market. The event will soon involve Master Gardener Volunteers, who will assist participants in building small container gardens from up-cycled cafeteria cans.

"Other schools want to get on board," Kienitz said. "They see that it is something positive to rally the school around. It is easier for them to implement now that they see the excitement coming out of Thomas Jefferson."

In deciding the future of the Thomas Jefferson garden, students will largely determine the path. "We have a plan as to where we want to go in the garden, and that has changed based on the kids' interest and creativity," Heinrich said. "Their eyes just brighten up when they walk outside and see something popping out of the ground. We always remind our students that a seed is magic, because it truly is."



Renee Heinrich's Science Blog: <http://scienceschoolyard.blogspot.com/search/label/garden>

This article was written by the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative, which supports and connects school gardens throughout Wisconsin. Visit www.WIschoolgardens.org to learn more about WSGI, find school garden resources, and connect with other garden educators!