

A Taste of Spring: Garden Club and Farmers Market Build Health and Wellness Efforts at MCS

A welcome appearance during a rain-soaked month of March, the sun found a rare opening in the clouds on a recent Wednesday, spotlighting a scene of green unfolding on the Manzanita Community School (MCS) campus.

Out on the yard, the school garden's plants and flowers were lush after the rains, and nearby the Farmers Market – a weekly fixture every Wednesday – was loaded with fruits and vegetables and drawing a crowd.

In the MCS garden, AmeriCorps volunteer and Manzanita Garden Coordinator Louisa Hartigan was teaching 1st-graders in our "outdoor classroom." The class intently drew the garden's plants and flowers and observed the insects hovering around them while discussing pollination, seed dispersal, and other science concepts.

The hands-on, interactive garden learning "really challenges them to think in a way they're not always used to," says Hartigan. "It's exciting for them to learn about nature and the world around them."

Mariah, a student in Christina Wells' 4th-grade class, has clearly absorbed the science at work in the garden: "We get to learn about plants and fruits. I liked seeing the holes in the lemon leaf that the gases come in and out of -- the carbon dioxide and the oxygen."

The kids are also putting their green thumbs to practical use, in the kitchen. They recently assembled a salad of several lettuce varieties, herbs, spring onions, and edible flowers (nasturtium and calendula) – all straight from the garden. "Salad is

not always a food that kids embrace," notes Hartigan, "but because they had grown the



Garden Coordinator Louisa Hartigan and 1st-graders studying in the garden

food themselves and prepared it together, they were excited about eating it."

"What I like about the garden is that you can plant what you like to eat or see and you can cook what you like for dinner," says Juan, also in Wells' 4th-grade class.

Exposure to new foods from the garden has also led students to be more adventurous in sampling items from the salad bar at lunch. "By making things more familiar, we're helping them explore what makes up a healthy diet," says Hartigan.

Over at the Farmers Market, volunteer Haydee Jimenez was busy fielding orders from parents, students, and MCS neighbors. Now in its

second year, the mostly-organic Market has become a regular stop for those seeking healthy, reasonably priced produce. "We have a lot of people from the outside community come in," says Jimenez. "They drive by on their way to the grocery store, and end up shopping here because we're organic and the prices are lower. We now have loyal customers who even place their orders ahead of time."

Ultimately, though, it's MCS students who benefit most from this weekly presence of produce. The school has officially become a "no-chip" campus, and Jimenez says the Market represents a school-wide dedication to health and wellness, along with the Garden Club and Playworks, which promotes physical fitness and leadership during recess.

"We hear them say, 'Oh, we're eating organic, this is better than regular fruit!'" Jimenez says. "Many of them never ate organics until the Farmers Market came along. We're doing it to show kids there are healthy choices they can make."



Students line up for fresh produce at the Farmers Market

was busy fielding orders from parents, students, and MCS

Collaborative Community Spirit Spurs Academic Achievement Gains

School was over for the day, and Rosa Aguirre's 5th-grade classroom had emptied out. But as the interview for this article got underway, a handful of kids popped in periodically. Had they been current MCS students, it would be business as usual. What made it unique: They were all former students, now in middle school, stopping by to say hello or offer their help. One of them, an 8th-grader, volunteers so often in Aguirre's room that she calls him her "little TA."

Aguirre considers this culture of coming back a sign of what makes Manzanita Community School just that: a community school. Having taught here since before MCS "went small," she ought to know. "I was here when there were 900-plus students," she reflects. "The climate now is very different: We've really worked to make it more like a home. Our kids feel safer and all of the teachers know all the kids' names."

Not surprisingly, given the staff's dedication to every single student, Aguirre has plenty of individual success stories to share. Among them, a student who had scored Far Below Basic in Math diligently worked to jump three achievement rungs and reach Proficient.

"She made tremendous gains," recalls Aguirre. "It's not that she didn't have the skills. She just needed a little extra attention, and then her lightbulb turned on. It's all about meeting the needs of individual kids, making education less 'one size fits all' and more individualized. That has been our goal and I think we've done it really well."

This inclusive environment extends to families as well, Aguirre says. "We establish relationships with students' parents, with their siblings. I'll tell a student, 'I saw your cousin playing basketball for Skyline the other night.' We build these lifetime connections, and it's nice for them to feel like part of something bigger."

A sense of community also prevails over in Allison Stormont's 3rd-grade class, where



3rd-grade teacher Allison Stormont with students

Stormont says collaboration with fellow 3rd-grade teacher Tiffayne Lucas has been key in helping students excel. "We've been working together a lot," says Stormont, "trying new ideas we've read about in the current research." This collaboration extends to the other grades as well: The MCS teaching staff have all been using a reading comprehension curriculum called "Strategies at Work."

Focusing on non-fiction texts, they have taught strategies that sound more like high-school or college-level skills: using Post-its to mark important passages and make connections between different sections of the text; learning the art of highlighting; interpreting glossaries and indexes, and more.

"We're trying to go beyond what's just in the standards," Stormont explains. "When they get older, they're going to be reading

mostly non-fiction in school, so we're trying to bridge that gap now. Students are excited and engaged. We're also talking a lot about what building blocks they can use as learners, and trying to empower kids to take charge of their own learning and keep on going."

Stormont has seen this empowerment play out during the course of the year, particularly during "independent learning" sessions. Out of the immediate supervision of their teacher, one might expect to see 3rd-graders drift from the task at hand. But Stormont is seeing kids "setting goals, completing all their work, and realizing they are in control of their learning."

As 3rd-grader Cynria puts it, "I always try to work efficiently because it helps me get my grades up, be smarter, and learn more. I just concentrate on doing my work."

Academic Achievement on the Rise

The work described above has produced notable school-wide achievement gains for Manzanita Community School's young scholars. Our 2010 California Standards Test (CST) scores saw double-digit percentage point gains in students moving out of "below basic" levels and into "proficient" and "advanced" tiers. This was the case in both Math and English, an accomplishment equaled by only two other schools, city-wide. As a result, our Academic Performance Index (API), which crunches CST scores into one big number, rose 61 points – the fourth-greatest growth among Oakland elementary schools.



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