The Ellen Hopkins Elementary School Garden is a small plot that has brought more than just produce to the children, teachers, and parents of the school. Since its beginning, the garden has presented a learning experience for all of the volunteers involved and is making an impact beyond the grounds it sits upon.

Logistics

Jamie Holding Eagle, whose daughters currently attend Ellen Hopkins Elementary School, first suggested the idea of a school garden to the principal in October of 2011, and from then until March, parents and teachers were meeting to bring the garden to fruition.

“I played the part of ‘unofficial’ coordinator,” said Jaime in an interview. When Dr. Gretchen Harvey of Concordia College in Moorhead provided Jaime with a document called Checklist for Starting a Community Garden, Jaime figured out the components that the garden would need and then followed the checklist to start up the garden.

Using its $500 mini-grant from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation, the school was able to make the garden a physical reality. Most of the money went toward non-treated lumber supplies, which the Moorhead High School woodshop students used to construct three 4’x10’ beds for the garden. Seed Savers Exchange, a nonprofit organization focused on maintaining biodiversity through heirloom seeds, donated the seeds planted in the garden. Compost, peat moss, and other materials were purchased with the remaining funds from a previous garden project account. Parents also chipped in with donations, including a rain barrel for the garden.

Decision-making in regards to the garden was run by a committee consisting of parents and teachers at the elementary school, with all decisions discussed and approved by consensus.

Jamie reported that the school food service is not allowed to use the food produced by the garden, but the committee does have an idea of how the produce may be used, such as letting the beans dry until fall to be used in a class project—perhaps in the making of chili. The garden is small as of yet, and the rest of the produce will need to be distributed in small quantities.

“We haven’t harvested much yet,” said Jaime. “My daughter and I harvested some green beans this year, froze them, and plan to bring them to a class. We are focusing on quality of experience rather than quantity of food, so we didn’t expect to harvest much, especially in our first year. We also grew flowers because we has some in our supply box.”
The goal of the Ellen Hopkins School Garden focuses on learning and developing. Some teachers have incorporated garden projects into their curriculum, such as the second grade seed module and the fifth grade engineering module. This gives the teachers an opportunity to teach their classes with hands-on activities involving the outdoors.

In implementing this project, the volunteers of Ellen Hopkins have used their experience with previous projects to begin this garden on the right foot. The garden officially opened this May. “I think we went with an appropriate scale by starting with three raised beds,” Jaime indicated. “We can easily incorporate more. In a previous project, we had planted some apple trees, which became a sore spot because they were planted near the football area. We didn’t want this project to have the same mistake as the apple trees, so we made sure to get lots of input from the teachers.”

As of yet, the garden has not faced many challenges, even from the surprisingly cooperative weather and no need for a fence. The garden has generated interest from passerby, and one of the fifth grade teachers made an engraved wooden sign for the garden that helps to proclaim its presence. In addition to eliciting interest from the community, Jaime claims that it has provoked good discussion within the community and the school as well as among the children.

**Community Development**

Curious as ever, the children of Ellen Hopkins Elementary are excited to see the garden’s outcome, and they aren’t the only ones. Summer school teachers have also inquired about the project, and Jaime predicts that the excitement will only build more once the new school year begins.

The Ellen Hopkins School Garden is also building relationships among the parents, the school, and the community, drawing involvement from some parents who are otherwise uninvolved in the school itself.

“Before undertaking this project, I had no idea whom to talk to and where to start,” said Jaime. “I talked to people and got to find that they were parents of children at Ellen Hopkins too. At a community garden forum, two other parents and I got to meet another garden coordinator and have become involved in his projects as well. What’s also really cool is that with Seed Savers, we get to grow a variety, but we can save the seeds and pass them on to support other schools or communities that might want to start up a garden. We develop mentoring relationships and generate more support. This project has strengthened a lot of relationships and has built a multi-age, kid-friendly, educational space. It has created a nicer Moorhead community and has empowered teachers to become more receptive to the kids and their gardening experience. . . . The garden is building the community, and helps the teachers learn, too—to become better leaders.”

Every Tuesday from 9 to 10 a.m., Jaime, one of the teachers, and one other parent water the garden, and anyone else is free to water the unfenced garden at any time. The volunteers have attained permission from the school and park district to draw water from the irrigation box. The garden is also open to anyone for harvest when the produce is ready.

“Next year, I would love to scale it up,” Jaime reported. She says the logical next step that she would like to see implemented is the school composting its own waste material, but she believes it would present difficulties in implementation. In the two weeks before the beginning of school, the committee plans to discuss the garden in regards to this coming year.

The garden is presently used mostly as a learning tool, with revenue generation regarded as only a bonus if eventually attained. “There is always room to scale up,” said Jaime. “It kind of depends on how parents and teachers would like to use it.”

**The Learning Process**

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