Stephen-Argyle School Garden
Argyle, MN

Project Description

In this past school year, Jackie Chwialkowski’s class at Stephen-Argyle Central Elementary School got to raise a garden from seed to sale as part of a science and nutrition unit. After their initial instruction, the fourth graders took charge to care for the plants and later sell them to raise funds for the project’s continuation.

“They were a really responsible group,” reported Jackie. “The kids made the decisions of who watered on weekends and when to repot.” The children were even able to separate well into teams of their choosing. “I might not be able to do that with all classes.”

In this past year, the principal permitted the class to spend up to $300 to pay for supplies and garden utilities, and the plant sale money will be used to help sustain the garden. Jackie also intends to reuse materials when possible so that the educational experience can continue.

The students of this past class are also playing a role in improving the garden for the future. During the school year, they made a “What Not to Plant” list based on their gardening experience. They also made a list of the items that sold well at the sale, such as herbs and tomatoes. Jackie says she plans on taking some of these students back into her classroom next year to help teach the incoming class during the unit.

Logistics

Before receiving a $500 mini-grant from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation, Jackie Chwialkowski and her fourth grade class at Stephen-Argyle Central Elementary were already planting seeds for their class garden project. “We were just doing a science unit on plants and seeds, so we were already planting,” said Jackie in an interview. “We only learned about the grant a week before the deadline.”

But that didn’t stop them from applying for the grant. After receiving the $500, the class used the money to purchase soil, additional seeds, racks to hold the plants, grow lights, and fertilizer. The garden is housed indoors in an array of classroom pots.

Jackie created the initial plan for the garden and got her students started, but then she stepped back and let the kids take charge. The students separated themselves into teams, each responsible for a certain group of plants. As such, the kids were responsible for watering, fertilizing, and repotting as necessary. In addition, when the class hosted a plant sale just before Mothers’ Day, the children made flyers and ran the cash register as they sold their plants, now ready for the garden.

Before the sale, each student was allowed to take home up to five plants; beyond this, they had to purchase any additional plants they might want to claim before selling.

The Learning Process

The class garden is primarily intended to supplement the educational experience. “First and foremost, it’s meant to teach the students about plants and nutrition,” Jackie explained. During the unit, the class covered material on plant structures, the water cycle, vitamins and nutrients and the vegetables that contain them, how much one should consume in a day, and more. Altogether, this crossbred science-health unit took covered the span of about three months.

Some challenges that the garden faces include dedication of time and space, including having to operate the garden from start to finish within the school year. In the past year, Jackie had two large rooms with southward-facing windows: a perfect environment for an indoor class garden. However, this year, because of classroom shuffling, Jackie has to work around space and light constraints.
Nonetheless, Jackie has seen plenty of positive outcomes from the garden project, only a year old now. “The fact that the kids pretty much took ownership of the garden is huge. They became much more interested in plants, parts of plants, how they grow, and why they grow. They also became more interested in their food and nutrition. We went and toured a high tunnel, and when they saw garlic growing, they were very confused about what it was because they had never seen it before outside of the cloves in a grocery store.”

Jackie clearly sees the value in her class project as a learning tool for the students. “The biggest value is the excitement that the kids had. We have a lot of teachers who have been here for a long time, including me, and I think it’s good to try new things, especially hands-on approaches to learning. . . . I think it impacts the health of the students by making them aware of what they’re eating, where it comes from, and how much they should eat.” She recounted one “tasting day” session, where the class got the opportunity to try new vegetables. “All but one student tried everything.”

Jackie would also like to see similar projects spring up in other classrooms and schools. “I sure hope they are thinking about doing grants again,” she said. “Not that I expect to get one, but that other students may get the opportunity to try [gardening projects] and take charge.”

Community Development

The class garden at Stephen-Argyle Central Elementary is attracting attention not just from the students, but from the rest of the school and the community, including the newspapers and younger students, who got to see the plants grow. It also served as a conversation piece and a teamwork tool for the class.