

Growing Healthy Behaviors in the School Garden

West Oakland Middle School - Oakland, CA

2014

WHY CREATE A SCHOOL GARDEN?

For the students at West Oakland Middle School (WOMS), responding to community violence and family crisis often takes priority over healthy eating. For WOMS Wellness Champions, employees of the school-based health center, implementing a school garden was a meaningful and engaging way to address healthy eating with students. The garden aimed to improve student nutrition by exposing students to fresh fruits and vegetables, teaching them how to cook, and building a sense of community. Ensuring the garden was integrated with other school programs had the added benefit of solidifying the broader connection between the students' education and their overall health.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- 6th-8th grade
- 214 students
- 88% of students qualify for free/reduced-price meals

Ethnicity:

- 71% African American
- 10% White
- 9% Hispanic/Latino
- 6% Asian
- 4% Other

ACTION STEPS

WOMS Wellness Champions first partnered with Oakland Based Urban Gardens (OBUGS) in 2010 to build a garden classroom with planter boxes to engage students in producing and eating fresh fruits and vegetables. Wellness Champions and OBUGS worked with students to generate interest in the garden through nutrition and cooking demonstrations so students could learn to use the fresh produce they were growing. Wellness Champions encouraged teachers to create lesson plans that brought academic classes into the garden during the school day; for example, English classes practiced writing by creating instructions for the garden boxes. The garden also became a natural location for the health education curriculum. In addition, OBUGS provided weekly afterschool gardening and cooking classes. School staff expressed gratitude that OBUGS "has gone above and beyond by helping the school maintain the garden."



CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

An initial difficulty for the WOMS garden project involved logistical and staffing challenges that slowed the project and made it hard to generate excitement on campus, but a new principal who valued school wellness activities helped the garden come to life. Additionally, while Wellness Champions successfully engaged teachers and students in garden care and healthy eating, parents were not as involved. For WOMS parents, often dealing with serious problems related to poverty or crime, healthy eating is not always the priority. WOMS is reaching out to parents by including garden-grown produce in the food options available to families through the school-based food pantry program.

IMPACTS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The school garden has been successful in reaching the school community—over 80% of WOMS students and teachers have eaten produce from the garden. Many of the teachers, even English and Math classes, have incorporated the garden into their lessons, and afterschool school sports teams are regularly participating in cooking and nutrition education classes with OBUGS. “The garden is... helping kids to be as healthy as possible... which includes healthy eating,” said one Wellness Champion, “this is the new way that a health clinic works – like a community center – bringing the community in to talk about important (health) issues.” To sustain the garden and continue benefiting WOMS students and staff, the school-based health center has developed a low-cost sustainability plan employing AmeriCorp volunteers as garden activity coordinators. They have also written garden education into health center job descriptions as standard job responsibilities. The WOMS experience has been so positive that LifeLong Medical Care, the WOMS health center sponsor, plans to replicate

“We want the kids to make healthy choices, so [they] have to understand what it means to be healthy, and what to eat to be healthy.”

Wellness Champion

the garden project in other schools in which they operate health centers.

ADVICE FOR OTHER SCHOOLS

Working with professionals, such as OBUGS, helped create a successful garden program; OBUGS knew how to plant, maintain, and educate about the garden, but most importantly, they made it fun and engaging for students, fostering student buy-in and respect for the garden. Determining how the garden will function early in the planning process is key—will it be purely educational or connected to food access programs, providing fruits and vegetables for school meals or a food pantry? Holding a clear vision for the purpose of the garden not only guides initial design and activity planning, but also contributes to garden sustainability over the long term, positioning the garden as a unique and important element of the school.

For More Information:

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