

## Oaklawn Elementary



As carefully as any Kindergartener can, Oaklawn Elementary's youngest students dug into the moist, cool soil of their garden bed last spring, gingerly covering the roots of spindly, two-inch-tall sunflower seedlings. "Those seedlings looked a little anemic when they got planted," garden leader Charis Collins admitted, "but by the end of the summer they were ten feet tall, with the most beautiful blossoms in the garden."

Perhaps it is the promise of seeing the unexpected, or being a part of something a little bit magical, that makes school gardens so enchanting, and keeps students and teachers coming back for more opportunities to grow.

At Oaklawn, the garden program is built on strong connections within the school and the surrounding community. Each spring, Collins sends out a notice to her fellow teachers, asking them how they plan to use their garden plot for the year - each class manages one bed. The Kindergarten's sunflowers are part of a seed starting unit, while other classes have grown foods such as kohlrabi and squash for the school cafeteria. Collins' Gifted and Talented students have used the garden for biology and math lessons, and summer school art classes got students out in the garden on a daily basis.

"I've had a lot of support and freedom from our principal and other staff," Collins said. "No one has said it's too much work, and they're not afraid to step out of the box."

One of the in-school connections that has helped the garden reach all areas of the school is the support of district food service director Michelle Kloser, who has helped get garden produce into the cafeteria, both through the school lunch program and an "Adventurous Eaters" tray that features different garden-based recipes for students to taste. Successful Adventurers get a sticker that says, "I tried it!" Collins' young son has been one of many students affected by the



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program. “He came home one day and said, ‘Mom, my favorite food is tikka masala!’” Inspired by the garden, Kloser is making an effort to include other locally sources foods in the cafeteria as well.

In the surrounding community, the Oaklawn garden has received support from neighboring 3M, a local company that offered a grant to support the garden. “They are really close to our school building, so it felt like a good partnership, that we’re in their neighborhood,” Collins said. The Menominee cooperative grocery offers support through a program that allows bring-your-own-baggers to place a “bean” in one of several jars to support community projects. At the end of the year, the co-op will donate five cents for each bean in Oaklawn’s jar to support its garden program. “It’s like stuff that people do anyway – like passive fundraising,” Collins, who hopes to continue strengthening the garden’s co-op partnership, said.

Oaklawn also has strong connections to nearby UW-Stout. Farm to School AmeriCorps Volunteers have helped install garden beds and fence posts, and a visiting biology class brought in dozens of seedlings to plant with Oaklawn students. Oaklawn also connected with WSGI to provide technical assistance, such as garden layout. “I can write a mean grant, but I’m not so great at other things, like garden design,” Collins said. “They were able to hook me up with people who could help me.”

Each partnership makes the garden a little bit stronger. Its interwoven network among teachers, parents, higher education, local businesses, and school food service creates a place of positive community for students to explore and learn.

“I’m trying to keep an open mind about the future, and see where the community wants to go,” Collins said. “I’d love to see it become even more of a community hub, where concerned, like-minded community members can connect with kids. There’s just a lot of spokes on the wheel - I see partnerships developing between different aspects of the community, and gets kids’ hands in the dirt, of course. It’s a very natural connection.”

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