

Plymouth Schools: Following the Garden 'What if...'



This fall, Jessica Mella will stand in the produce section of the Plymouth Piggly Wiggly, ready to answer questions about tomatoes. Tomatoes, one of Plymouth Schools' Harvest of the Month, are featured in school taste tests and lunches, and on the vines in Plymouth school gardens.

Mella – who is a parent, dietician, and employee of Community Education & Recreation in the Plymouth School District – could tell you that a tomato is a good source of lycopene, a powerful antioxidant, or offer preparation tips and recipe ideas. (Tomatoes on the grill, anyone?) As Nutrition and Wellness Coordinator, Mella's position is dynamic, with programs to enhance nutrition education in the classroom, and to make sure kids see the same message at school lunch and at home. In Plymouth, a town of only 8,000, the grocery store is a great place to start.

When Mella first began her position in 2011, she talked monthly with a group of parents, to learn how they wanted to see nutrition improve in the district. Mella listened, and soon, parents saw their suggested changes show up in a school lunch program with fresher ingredients, community wellness classes, and school gardens.

Plymouth planted its first school garden in 2009 at Horizon elementary, when Mella, as a parent volunteer, asked the principal for permission to begin the initiative with several teachers. Since Mella began her position as Nutrition and Wellness Coordinator, every school in the district – three elementary, one middle and one high school – have a garden. "Some of the teachers and I just kept asking 'What if...What if...'" Mella said. "I think if there's enough people willing to talk about it, changes start happening. That's been so positive to see both as a parent and as an employee of the district."

The gardens are built to suit each school's needs. One elementary, where



August 2015

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permanent garden location is still undetermined, installed two wooden tee-pees that are easily mobile from year to year. This year, beans, peas, and sunflowers are climbing the tee-pees near the school entrance, helping to generate excitement among students as they plan their permanent garden space.

Gardens not only “teach kids where nutrition starts,” according to Mella, but are also used as academic teaching tools for a variety of other subjects. At Horizon, Mella begins each gardening season by asking teachers which kinds of plants they could use in their teaching. The Kindergarten teacher, for example, requested red runner beans, which make large, colorful seeds her class uses to practice counting in the fall. Second grade has requested corn, beans, and squash, so they can learn about the tradition of the Three Sisters garden. Third grade teacher Jacqueline Murphy uses the garden as part of her science curriculum. Her inquiry-based lesson asks students to observe different plant features, create diagrams, and finally, harvest seeds from garden plants. They use the seeds to start next year’s garden in the spring. “It’s always amazing to watch students ‘discover’ the life cycle of a plant in such an organic way,” she said. At Plymouth High School, botany students study plant spacing and soil requirements each year, and plan the school garden in the process.

Outside of the school day, after school groups use the gardens for taste testing and making fresh salsa at the district’s Youth Center. A summer school course called “Cooking and Growing Adventures” uses cold frames built by middle school Integrated Studies students to plant fall seeds and learn recipes for healthy garden snacks. With so much activity happening around each garden, every school has a Garden Champion who plays the critical role of coordinating gardening efforts and volunteers.

As garden “What if’s...” in Plymouth keep becoming reality, the district has continued to embrace new projects that will allow it to do even more with garden-

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den-based education. This September, Plymouth Schools will open its “Food Science and Agriculture Center,” a \$1 million project, on the high school campus. The new building will feature a large teaching greenhouse and brick classroom for agriculture lessons, and will also host community classes and educational events.

How does a small school district fund this kind of infrastructure? As the momentum behind school gardens and Farm to School in Plymouth grew over the last five years, conversations began to happen in the community. One of those conversations reached a member of the Plymouth Education Foundation. This person made an anonymous donation to start the project. From there, the foundation began a capitol campaign that raised the rest of the money in less than a year. “I think that just like any story,” Mella said, “it keeps growing and evolving, as people talk and spread the word.”

In the community, plenty of people have started talking about good food. Mella’s community classes – such as composting, making smoothies with garden ingredients, and cheese-making with herbs – have continued to grow in popularity, and she finds that even her adult students have many questions about the food they eat. Moreover, they are hungry to know more – whole foods cooking classes are at the top of the request list. Having a facility like the Food Science and Agriculture Center will help connect the Plymouth community to their schools and offer a place for people of all ages to learn together, have fun, and practice healthy living.

Between community classes, Farm to School’s fresh ingredients in the lunch line, and garden-based classroom curriculum, Plymouth Schools’ dietician really is helping students to see a consistent model for healthy eating and life-long learning. Soon, Plymouth’s healthy eating initiatives will expand to include nearby Sheboygan, as the two districts coordinate to offer the same Harvest of the Month and cross-pollinate their efforts to share information about featured veggies. Sheboygan has also followed Plymouth’s lead in hiring a dietician to coordinate nutrition and wellness programs in schools.

If your school or community is in the “What if...” stage of a garden or Farm to School program, we hope this story encourages you to follow the ellipse with community conversations around food that keep people talking long after they leave the Piggly Wiggly.

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