

Washburn School District



This spring, Washburn Elementary – a small district in northern Wisconsin – was one of a handful of schools called on by Michelle Obama to travel to Washington D.C. and take part in the 8th annual White House Kitchen Garden planting.

Mrs. Obama selected schools from around the country with one thing in common: inspiring school garden programs. After talking with principal Al Krause, there was no question that Washburn was more than qualified to represent Wisconsin on the national gardening stage.

Washburn Elementary's 6400 square foot teaching garden is one part of a robust Green and Healthy Schools program that is fully integrated into its curriculum, from 4K through high school. Other elements include a school apple orchard, Farm to School purchasing and use of garden produce in school meals, a school forest with a log cabin, natural play area in the woods behind the school, and, at the high school, a high tunnel, aquaponics lab, and classes focused on agriculture, sustainability, and other Green and Healthy topics. "It's hard to separate out all the different pieces, because it's all integrated, a mindset," Krause reflected. "But all the Green and Healthy initiatives really started with the garden."

Washburn's garden began almost a decade ago, and has survived multiple changes in school administration and national education policy. The garden's staying power, according to Krause, is due to its integration into every part of the school, and broad support from teachers, the school board, and the surrounding community.

Each spring, teachers and students from all grade levels at Washburn participate in the planting of the garden, and in the fall, they bring in the harvest. Summer school students and teachers are involved in caring for the garden from June through August, in addition to volunteers from the community. Two AmeriCorps Farm to School service members – one focused on local food procurement and the other on nutrition education – help support the garden and its connection to the classrooms. The district also employs a Green and Healthy Coordinator, who helps teachers integrate the garden and other Green and Healthy goals into their teaching, just like math goals.

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"The more we incorporate the garden into different parts of the school and classroom, the harder it will be for it to go away," Krause said. "So we put it into our curriculum, just like any other subject." Washburn's food service is also involved in the garden process, helping advise teachers and students on what crops to plant, based on what can be used in the cafeteria. The garden and other Green and Healthy goals are also a part of the district's annual budgeting and planning process, including plans for how to sustain the program even if AmeriCorps members are no longer available.

"I may be biased because I am working in administration," Krause said, "but really programs come and go all the time in education. Our district has made a financial commitment to continuing the program even when there are cuts, because they see it is as so valuable. It is a part of what we do and who we are."

The garden program, Krause said, "has become a reflection of what our community values and is proud of. We are never afraid to ask for help, and have learned how much people really want to give." The community's response has been tremendous, from summer volunteers to local tax dollars that support the garden, to donations of materials from businesses and community members.

Washburn has seen the results of the garden in the attitudes of their kids. "We see it in the lunch line, the kids are choosing the vegetables, and making that part of their lifestyle," Krause said.

Although their visit to the White House was the trip of a lifetime, students seemed at home in the garden. As his students intermingled with other young gardeners, Krause realized that even though each school came from a different setting – from inner-city schools with gardens on rooftops to rural schools with plenty of land like Washburn – but they all had one thing in common: integrating the garden throughout the curriculum, school, and community. "It was inspiring to see that that can happen anywhere," Krause said.

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