

EDUCATION WEEK

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COMMENTARY

'Hands-in-the-Dirt' Learning

By Jane Hirschi

School gardens are a wonderful learning opportunity for students, according to the thousands of teachers around the country who use them. What is more, these teachers' perceptions are backed up by the growing evidence that correlates garden-based learning with academic achievement, positive social-emotional outcomes, and healthy food choices.

But what about the teachers who don't have a garden at their school, and the students who never experience hands-in-the-dirt learning? Are school gardens just for schools lucky enough to have a dedicated volunteer base or a corps of teachers committed to keeping the garden alive? Or is garden-based learning a critical educational resource all students need, as important to children's education as computer labs and libraries?

Around the country, school districts are wrestling with where to invest their limited resources in order to have the biggest positive impact on children. Some of these districts are considering garden-based learning and looking to programs that can help them integrate a school garden with teachers' practice. As the director of just such a program, I see how important these partnerships are to teachers. At the same time, I am convinced that the real key to making garden-based learning accessible to all students is in the hands of teachers.

As the director of a school garden program in 20 urban schools in Cambridge, Mass., and Boston, I've witnessed hundreds of teachers using their school gardens for lessons over the past 15 years. Bursting with color and texture, gardens are a perfect space for sensory learning. Bugs, worms, and other animal life can be found with the scoop of a hand trowel or a peek under a stone, revealing action-packed natural habitats even in urban neighborhoods. Sky and weather provide a constantly changing backdrop to these outdoor classrooms. And, of course, in any edible learning garden, there is food. The school garden is an endlessly engaging place for kids to explore food systems and nutrition with a taste, nibble, or outright feast.

Over and over again, teachers tell me that the school garden reminds them of why they went into teaching in the first place: The garden sparks their students' curiosity and they are

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excited to learn; being in the garden with permission to dig, harvest, and plant is a brand-new experience for many of their students, especially in urban neighborhoods. A learning garden in the schoolyard, teachers say, provides a lot of entry points for children's interests, serving the needs of many different kinds of learners.

The garden is ripe with projects that need to be done, problems to solve, solutions to discuss, and processes to explain. Teachers know that spending time in a school garden inspires collaboration, teamwork, and most of all, conversation. Experienced teachers use time in

the garden as a springboard for math word problems, scientific observation and description, and writing practice. Teachers frequently note that garden-based learning is particularly beneficial for their English-language learners and students with other special-learning needs because the garden sparks students' interest, and that, in turn, often leads to conversation and new vocabulary.

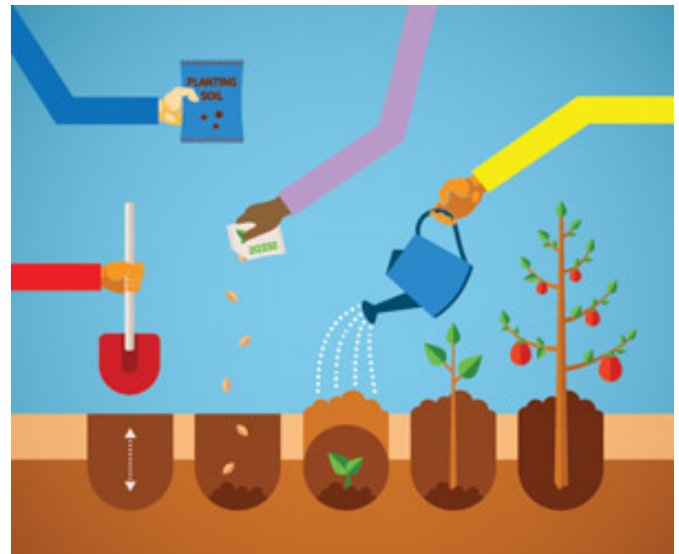
Garden-based learning in the hands of a skilled teacher, in other words, adds up to a big impact on student learning. Seeing this reinforces a teacher's garden use and keeps that particular teacher convinced that garden-based lessons have a solid place in her or his practice.

Yet truly integrated garden-based learning depends on not just a handful of teachers in some schools, but whole-school communities invested in making this a daily experience for students and easily accessible to teachers. A broad network of teachers demonstrating garden-based lessons as a standard element of classroom teaching is the key to its integration. Such a community of garden-based learning practice will "nurture the seed" in three ways.

- *Share.* Teachers can reinforce their practice by learning from each other. Garden lessons that connect to the curriculum, effective classroom-management in the outdoors, and how to best use garden-support staff (if you have it)—all of this knowledge is already out there and being tested every day by some teacher, somewhere. The knowledge and experience that teachers have accumulated about garden-based education is perhaps the most valuable information a new or experienced teacher needs to get started.

"Teachers tell me that the school garden reminds them of why they went into teaching in the first place."

- *Ask.* Whether it's professional-development training at your school, adequate support staff to care for the learning garden and help teachers lead lessons, or a learning garden itself, teachers usually know what they need to make the garden concept work for them. Speak up



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and ask for what you need to make garden-based education part of your teaching practice. If teachers don't ask, school districts don't listen.

- *Advocate.* There are also the long-term "asks" that are necessary to make sure the garden program is sustainable. As districts make decisions about what's best for their students, teachers' voices need to be heard on this subject, if garden-based education is going to reach more schools and remain in the ones where it's now practiced. Advocate for a curriculum that allows for experiential strategies like garden-based learning. Advocate for school garden facilities that stand the test of time. Advocate for enough time to extend lessons outside to the learning garden, to allow for students' projects and exploration in their schoolyard.

Speaking as a partner to 20 urban schools that are working on integrating garden-based learning, I know that all of us bring important supports to teachers' garden use. Our garden coordinators encourage teachers to get their students outdoors to learn, for one. We also take care of the school garden, which, like any other educational resource in the school, is too big a task for most teachers to take on in their already-busy day.

Environmental changes and the public's increasing awareness of healthy food choices and healthy living add an urgency to making outdoor, garden-based education a reality for children. Consequently, more districts are showing interest in how they can get garden-based learning happening for their students.

It's an exciting vision. Every child growing up with garden-based learning at school. Every child engaged and curious, emerging from a learning garden carrying questions, observations, and interest back to the classroom. Every child familiar with the food they see growing in their garden and comfortable with the natural environment right where they live, learn, and play. But this vision needs teachers themselves to take sharing, asking, and advocating for school garden programs to a wider, louder level. It can happen if enough teachers join their peers in the growing community of garden-based learning.

Jane Hirschi is the founding director of CitySprouts, a garden-based-learning program for schools, located in Cambridge, Mass. Her book Ripe for Change: Garden-based Learning in Schools will be published in April by Harvard Education Press.

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