



## Food, Hunger, and the Future of School Gardens

By Jane S. Hirschi

It's hard to find a more compelling image of health than children learning, playing, and exploring in the school garden. For many of us, it is the obvious conclusion to connecting children to the food they eat and the natural world around them. School gardens have the potential to play a vital role in addressing hunger by growing food in places where children spend the majority of their time; and secondly, by contributing to the school menu and extending the conversation about hunger and nutrition to the "kids' table."

The National Garden Association estimates that there are tens of thousands of school gardens around the country—in every state and nearly every school district. By the sheer number of school gardens, one would think that every child in the country has both first-hand knowledge of where their food comes from and an acquaintance with the natural environment in their neighborhood.

Yet in spite of the number of school garden initiatives, children's hunger and issues related to nutrition-poor diets continue to increase. If school gardens are such an obvious answer to food education and lifestyle change, then why aren't we seeing a significant improvement in kids' access to food and a solid shift toward healthier food choices? In reality, school gardens hardly register on the map of hunger and food-education initiatives. Here are two big reasons why:



First, many of those tens of thousands of school gardens in the U.S. lack the resources and infrastructure to make an impact on more than but a small portion of the kids in a school. School gardens are frequently cited but rarely used school-wide as an on-going, year-to-year part of children's daily learning. The reality is that most school gardens' very existence depends on a few parents or a sole, inspired teacher who keep the garden going in their "spare" time. These school gardens are a wonderful, rich experience... but because access to them depends on a volunteer or two, only a small number of children actually experience that wonderful promise.



Secondly, when school gardens are supported with program staff, they are most frequently developed as food and nutrition initiatives separate from the academic efforts of a school. Why is this an obstacle? By definition, health & nutrition programs are competing with academics for children and teachers' time. And *time* is arguably the single most important resource in public education. School gardens as a health & nutrition initiative force schools to choose between time spent on children's health and time spent on their academic achievement. It adds up to loss for the children who most desperately need both.

The problem is not inherent in school gardens, though. It is a problem of vision. School gardens *do* have the potential to integrate growing, harvesting (and eating) as part of children’s already-mandated academic lessons. It is time to get serious about bridging the potential of school gardens as a valid educational resource and the desperate need to improve our children’s diets and access to good food in their own neighborhoods.

The resources we expect all public schools to have on-site—a computer lab, a school library, a gym and a place for kids to eat lunch—should include an outdoor classroom garden with food-growing plants. Research shows that school gardens help children learn by providing real-world applications for concepts they learn in books<sup>1</sup>. School gardens are particularly effective for students with kinetic learning styles, and with ESL students<sup>2</sup>. Like any resource, school gardens need facilitation to make them an engaging, healthful, learning experience for kids. A truly integrated school garden program doesn’t add garden-time as an extra enhancement; it provides essential, on-going support to teachers in extending classroom lessons to the outdoor classroom.

It can be done: [CitySprouts](#) is an example of such a program. For the past 10 years, CitySprouts has been working with the Cambridge, Massachusetts, public school district to extend students’ classroom lessons outside to food-growing gardens at every school. [Real School Gardens](#) provides a program for over 70 schools throughout north Texas to support teachers’ lessons outside in their school gardens. These are two examples of school garden programs that build on schools’ academic goals, and therefore make school gardens part of the learning experience expected for every child.

When a school garden is fundamentally integrated with the mandated academic curricula at the school or even district level, it is no longer in competition with academic classroom time. And that means that all of the children in the school are spending time in their food-growing garden as part of their math, science, and literacy lessons. Now the children have a reference for food and health education, and a place to build on whatever initiatives are happening in the cafeteria or after school. The national [Farm to School](#) movement is already having an impact on school food procurement and lunch menus (see Meredith Modzelewski’s [article](#) in the previous issue). When all the children in a school have first-hand knowledge of growing peas, tomatoes, greens and other vegetables, there is a base for effective cafeteria education that will impact the entire school population. School gardens can also be training sites for cafeteria staff to learn about incorporating fresh fruits and vegetables into the new school menu; they can be the venue for afterschool nutrition and cooking for the neighborhood and families. School gardens are natural sites for urban farmers markets. [The Food Project](#), for example, runs a weekly farm stand at a school in Lynn, Massachusetts, where they also support a school garden.



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<sup>1</sup> Blair, D. 2009. The child in the garden: An evaluative review of the benefits of school gardening. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 40(2), 15-38

<sup>2</sup> Tangen, D. & Fielding-Barnsley, R. (2007). Environmental education in a culturally diverse school. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 23, 23-30

Teachers, parents, kids and other school garden champions need to start visualizing school gardens that are truly integrated with academic goals. Then educators will begin to include school gardens in their definition of effective education. And *then* school gardens will start to fulfill that promise of health and good food for all.



When school gardens show that they positively impact children’s academic achievement, and when teachers get the support they need to learn to use their school’s garden with their struggling students, our urban children will have opportunity and time to spend in their school garden. Caitlin Flanagan angered a lot of school garden champions when she dismissed the educational value of school gardens in struggling, urban schools (*The Atlantic* Jan. 2010) but she also inadvertently touched a truth—school gardens have not been a significant part of education since John Dewey promoted them in the last century. Our children need strong and focused academics. And they need better access to fresh vegetables and support for making better diet choices. School gardens can offer both.

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