

Garden Tasting Party Fun at Piney Woods Elementary

Third-graders try foods they grew in school garden

It's not the kind of thing you expect to hear a third-grader say, but it was clear something new is growing at Piney Woods Elementary School during the October 21 Garden Tasting Party.

"I really like kale chips and spinach," said Karen Filippelli, a third-grader in Mrs. Vance's class. "I didn't think I did, but I really do...Especially when I dip them in ranch dressing."

Piney Woods has become the Mifflin Independent District's first Growing Great pilot school. The cross-curricular program integrates science, nutrition, physical education, math, and as many other subjects as possible into garden-focused learning. Now in its second year, third grade has been the focus for the program, but Piney Woods is about to expand it to all grade levels.

"I wasn't sure about all this at first—there are a huge number of moving pieces," Hudson said, "but I can honestly say this is one of the most transformative programs I've ever implemented."

What made Hudson change his mind? The program is driving success of all kinds all across the school. It has a sort of Midas touch in so many areas that its overall impact is undeniable.

First, students plant and maintain the crops in the garden as part of their science curriculum. This has led to approximately a 10% increase in pass rates for third-graders last year, according to Holly Flax, the division's director of science instruction.

Next, the school nutrition team harvests the crops as they are ready and serves them to students in the cafeteria. As a result of same-day on-site harvesting, the Lil Pine Needles are eating the freshest foods possible. Coordinating the lunch line needs with the crops planted has also led to serious cost reductions.

"Our Nutrition Services Department didn't have to order lettuce for approximately three months," explained Darryl Philbin, assistant superintendent for operations. "That's a savings of hundreds of dollars."

But what kid do you know wants to eat Brussel sprouts? One other critical piece in tying it all together has been the Garden Tasting Party. The entire grade level gathers once a season to see the fruits (and vegetables) of their labors. With the pre-made connection, students have to the garden food, gym teacher Andy Bernard has an easier time making the final step—getting them to actually eat it.

“We make it a fun event, so most of the kids give it a shot, and just about all of them find something they like,” he said.

That willingness to try new food is a habit that could have a major impact on lifelong health outcomes for every student.

“All of the research shows that students who have positive experiences trying new foods at this age generally experience better nutrition throughout their lives,” said Pam Beesly, nutrition services director. “This garden program is a success because it integrates hands-on science instruction, nutrition, and fun to get students excited about the foods they choose to eat.”

This program may be sowing seeds for lifelong health, boosting science comprehension, and saving taxpayer dollars. But for students like David Wallace, the focus is a little different.

“It was fun to grow them all up out there,” he said.

-Submitted by Ryan Howard, Communications Coordinator Mifflin Independent School District

PICTURE1: Karen Filippelli, Piney Woods third-grader, munches on kale chips at the October 21 Garden Tasting Party.

PICTURE2: Piney Woods Elementary School Principal Stanley Hudson shows off the rows of the Growing Great Garden.