



Richland County

At the Intersection of Health and Education: The Story of the Green Peoplez

Summary

The Creating Healthy Communities (CHC) project, North End Community Improvement Collaborative (NECIC) and others have invested in the full development of the Blust Avenue Teaching Garden, located in the North End of Mansfield. This has become a vibrant site for fresh food production, garden-related learning programs, and a source of produce for the summer North End Farmers Market (NEFM). As such, it was a perfect site to host a youth garden club as part of the Real Opportunities for Achievement and Readiness (ROAR) mentoring program for students of the Mansfield City Schools. From the development of the youth garden club came a small team of market vendors who called themselves the Green Peoplez.

Challenge

For many children in Mansfield, educational and economic barriers put them at a disadvantage for lifelong health and wellness. The City of Mansfield has suffered in recent years from employment shifts, economic decline and neighborhood blight.

The Mansfield City Schools, serving the majority of students from the City, reflect that of the larger community. More than 84 percent of the students within this school system are from families facing economic challenges where food insecurity, jobs, housing and transportation are a daily struggle. The Mansfield City School district is considered to be a low performing district with four-year graduation rates below those of similar districts and the overall state average.

Solution

The NECIC received grant funding through the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) to establish a ROAR mentorship program for students of the Mansfield City Schools in grades 7-12. The goals of the ROAR program are aligned with ODE objectives to build positive futures and a sense of resiliency, to support character development and assist students in finding their pathway to achievement.

A youth garden club was developed as one of the mentoring opportunities for students and took advantage of the space and facilities of the Blust Avenue Teaching Garden. Students came to the garden weekly to learn all aspects of growing healthy foods, from seed to table. They were mentored to develop entrepreneurial and marketing skills. Students were given real life work experience as vendors at the NEFM.



Results

During the school year, the ROAR youth garden club engaged about 18 students. They arrived with varied interest in outdoor garden work, transportation and family challenges, and interpersonal-group conflicts. The garden experience, along with immediate gratification and excitement about growing food, quickly became a positive influence and helped the teens overcome behavioral and learning issues; it became a refuge and provided strong support for them. It also allowed garden club members hands-on learning and work experience away from family and school, and a break from the pull of technology. Teamwork and physical exertion provided an outlet for stress and isolation while promoting positive emotional health. Constant opportunities for healthy social interaction—such as between students and the general public at the Blust Garden and the NEFM—proved to build confidence, self-image, and improve social skills.

A committed group of four students continued working in the garden throughout the summer even though the ROAR program had ended. Naming themselves the “Green Peoplez” they became a strong group of exceptional market gardeners. They performed the physical effort of growing, tending, and harvesting vegetables; learned to prepare produce for market by weighing, keeping records, and pricing items; created their own market booth for the NEFM; and were present weekly to handle set-up, customer service and sales transactions.

Surveys and interviews completed with the Green Peoplez showed positive results from their experience. The youth increased their consumption of vegetables during their time in the garden. Most of their families benefited

as well from excess produce, which was distributed for the students to take home. All students reported forming new friendships and improving their social skills and emotional control through their work in the garden, gaining a sense of hopefulness about their futures.

Sustaining Success

ROAR will continue as a school-community partnership to engage, support, and enhance the community and educational experience of MCS students. The youth garden club will begin again in the early spring.

The Blust Avenue Teaching Garden will continue to offer space, programming and education for youth and adults in the community. It has been developed to near capacity and offers space for growing both fruits and vegetables.

Your Involvement is Key

Solutions to community problems can best be found in the community itself. The Blust Avenue Teaching Garden has grown to become a strong community asset, a driver for healthy food production and an avenue for increased fresh food access in the North End community. This space, as well as the local garden experts, are available to individuals, youth programs and others.

The ROAR mentoring program relies on the support and participation of mentors from the community. Investing in the growth and development of our youth can change the future for them and for our community. Each of us has something to offer a young person. To get involved, contact NECIC at 419-525-3101.



“We grow many things at the Blust Avenue Teaching Garden, but watching those students blossom into responsible young adults was our most satisfying crop.”

— Candace Harrell, Teaching Garden Coordinator, North End Community Improvement Collaborative



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