

Final Service Story 2023

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July 2023

As I finish up my two years of serving as an AmeriCorps Farm to School Specialist, it's amazing to reflect on all of the momentum I've been able to build around F2S programming in that time at my sites. Both of the school gardens I oversaw have been entirely transformed in that time. The Lake View school garden received an entire facelift—we scraped the garden clean this spring and were able to build an entire new garden in a few months. This garden is more accessible—in physical terms, with higher garden beds, people with mobility issues can more easily engage in gardening—but also in terms of being a community harvesting spot. The garden at Elvehjem Elementary has expanded to include a three sisters garden plot and a digging pit, as well as some aesthetic and practical accents, such as ADA accessible beds, an arbor, and an extra whiteboard for the outdoor classroom. Both gardens are peppered with handmade educational signs offering information on pollinator and decomposer ID, the water cycle, the parts of a plant, the life cycle of plants, behavioral expectations, and more.

I've stewarded a popular cultural cooking club that engages the students of a diverse school in the cuisine of their families and their classmates. Students learned how to chop, mince, dice, measure, stir, peel, open cans, fry, and blend, all while also learning that vegetable-forward meals cooked in a variety of ways are not only fun to make, but fun to eat! Students would eagerly bring home food they cooked in the club to share with their families, and I was constantly asked in the hallways if more spots had opened up in the club so that new students could join. It was wonderful to see students become more confident in their ability to cook and in their willingness to try new foods as the weeks progressed. They seemed to develop a sense of trust with me, believing that if I was encouraging them to try something new, it wouldn't be so bad. It might even be surprisingly wonderful.

I led the charge on building a relationship between Rooted and the Madison Metropolitan School District, so that student-grown produce could end up in their lunchrooms. Over several months of steadily building a relationship with the nutrition director of MMSD, we began "The Lettuce Project", a pilot attempt to have students grow lettuce in their classrooms that matured at student-run Rooted farms, and was ultimately served to them in salads in their lunch. The project was a success, which is noteworthy for a school district as large as MMSD. The nutrition director has a lot of enthusiasm to capitalize on that success and expand the ways that student-grown produce can appear in their cafeterias moving forward.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I developed friendly and meaningful relationships with hundreds of students, dozens of teachers, and many school administrators. I gained valuable experience as an educator—the difference in the confidence between me teaching now and when I started is stark and notable. I developed so many valuable skills, such as creating compelling lesson plans, leadership in a classroom, and flexibility. These relationships and skills are components of my service that I will carry forward with me for the rest of my life.