

Creating “green teams” and growing student passions

Gwen Murphy Q1 Service Story AmeriCorps Farm to School Program

As I wrap up my first few months as a Farm to School Specialist in Madison, WI I am grateful for the variety of experiences I have had with students and community members interested in supporting healthy relationships with foods and local farmers. Both of my service sites, La Follette High School and Schenk Elementary, quickly created ‘Green Teams’ to guide F2S programming to what is most engaging or needed for their community. I am continuously struck by the willingness of volunteers and staff to donate time, resources, and brainpower to make sure our programs are sustainable through long-term financial and administrative support.

Seeing passions connect people and ideas is what invigorates me to continue in this work. At La Follette High School, an engaged teacher took time to introduce me to multiple other faculty and staff which has allowed relationships and connections throughout the school to grow. What started as a casual conversation about outdoor education, turned into a potential to create and interweave the interests of three areas in after school programming: wood working, culinary arts, and garden/green clubs. All of these clubs offer opportunities for students to build skills they will use after graduation as well as the immediate satisfaction of seeing and sharing the fruits of their labor. Whether that be a meal shared with family after culinary club, showing off a new wooden garden bed to a friend during lunch hour, or watching the growth of vegetables in the garden that you planted from seed; students have many opportunities to realize they’re fully capable of creating and harvesting new things on their own. The clubs are sustainable through funding supplied by the Madison School & Community Recreation (MSCR) program and it allows cyclical relationships for the clubs to support each other. These relationships are new but the possibilities are endless. For example, food scraps from the culinary club can supply composting bins that will in turn provide rich, organic soil to the green club and the green club can plant and tend to fresh ingredients that will be used in the kitchen by the culinary club. Beyond after school clubs, over the years La Follette has invested in fantastic outdoor learning resources including a regrowth prairie, arboretum, and greenhouse which can be used in applied teaching techniques for all subjects in addition to providing safe spaces for students to relax and enjoy the outdoors.

Schenk Elementary school also has strong support from teachers and the PTO which has led to many outdoor garden activities and lessons. This past fall, students learned how seeds travel by exploring seed pods within their own garden. Touching, smelling, and seeing how seeds form and move gives students an intuitive understanding of nature’s natural growth cycles and allows alternative teaching methods for students who learn better with hands-on opportunities. To make the garden feel like their own, students made bird feeders that they could hang in the garden to watch birds from their classrooms or take home to share their knowledge with caregivers. They also added handprints to benches in the garden so they can watch how their hands grow with the garden over time and feel a strong sense of belonging when they are learning in the outdoor space. Schenk has many exciting plans for spring and I am looking forward to supporting students as they cover more science topics in the garden in the upcoming months.