

Learning to Grow

Spencer Butte Middle School reaps vegetables and profit

BY ANNA V. SMITH



ILLUSTRATION BY ALICE FEAGAN | ALICEFEAGAN.COM

Spencer Butte Middle School's garden program has grown from the seed of an idea to a self-sustaining garden with its own economic income. The garden, managed by students, sells its lettuce and other veggies to the Eugene School District, which then uses them in the cafeteria at the school.

"Kids run the entire garden, though we do have a volunteer who helps get the starts going," says BJ Blake, principal at Spencer Butte. "But the plants are taken care of and harvested by our kids."

The lettuce is grown, picked and bagged by the students, who get 65 cents a pound to buy other tools, plant starts, seeds and more, according to Keith Fiedler, head of Eugene School District's Nutritional Services.

"If we could wave a wand, we'd say we want the school gardens to grow as much food as possible," Fiedler says. "It's great to have the kids see the economic factors and be

a part of them, and have pride about what's on their plate."

Spencer Butte Middle School is one example of the 77 public schools with gardens in Lane County that are using their own produce in cafeteria menus. In recent years, the state has encouraged Oregon schools to focus on integrating locally sourced foods into their menus, with schools receiving \$1.17 million in 2013, according to the Oregon Department of Education.

Over the past five years that Blake has been a principal at the middle school, she's seen a lot of growth with the program.

"We've added another greenhouse and some beds, we've gotten our recycling figured out," Blake says. "It just continues to grow as we figure out what our need is. Our classes are centered around respect for the planet, respect about place and ourselves, and so whatever you do, you need to really look at how you are respecting those things."

Blake says that by making food education a main

concern, it also links to larger ideas about the environment, waste and nutrition. This way, the education goes beyond the classroom, one example being the "waste centers" the school has set up, which include options of composting, recycling and garbage.

Overall, Blake says, the school has reduced waste to a quarter of what it was at the beginning of her tenure.

Expanding the vegetable variety has been discussed, but both Fiedler and Blake remain realistic about the time and energy it takes to add different vegetables into the mix. Instead, Blake says they've decided to focus on the progress thus far, while hoping that Spencer Butte might be a model for other schools to see how it can be done.

"I absolutely think that it could be replicated in other schools. You just need to commit support to it and we made that a priority," she says. ■

The School Garden Project, responsible for many of the gardens in Eugene, is always looking for volunteers. Email info@schoolgardenproject.org or call 284-1001.



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