

# “Growing Our Future” Program Includes School Gardens and Farm Tours: Owen J. Roberts School District



## Contact Information

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## Objective

■ The Owen J. Roberts Healthy School Healthy Farms: “Growing Our Future” program addresses the emerging epidemic of diet-related diseases by introducing healthful foods and eating habits. This is accomplished through schoolyard gardens, farm tours, food sampling, hands-on cooking, and nutrition education. Additionally, the program fosters relationships with farmers, introduces the value of locally produced foods, and builds community. The program strives to:

- Increase the student and parent connection to food sources through growing and harvesting of foods in educational outdoor gardens and through visits to working farms;
- Increase the consumption of nutritious food by teaching children and parents how to make better food choices;
- Increase student and parent awareness and value of locally grown food and enlist the support of parents to help increase children's consumption of fresh local products;
- Support Pennsylvania's agricultural landscape and economy by teaching students and parents agricultural and natural resource stewardship, by offering access to local foods, and by teaching how to cook with local foods; and
- Build community and sense of place in the community through various opportunities to meet local farmers and chefs and to participate in a community Farm Market event to help increase children's consumption of fresh local products.

## Category

- Health Education

## Description

- This program was piloted in one school, East Vincent Elementary School (EVE), beginning with an outdoor educational garden. The pilot program at EVE expanded to nutrition education and guided discovery that supports Pennsylvania Standards for Kindergarten Education. EVE Kindergarten teachers received a grant to provide whole food snacks (foods that are grown). Students learn about “healthy choices” in a variety of ways. The program has now expanded through the PA Department of Agriculture Healthy Farms, Healthy Schools Grant to include all district kindergarten students in five elementary schools.
- Individual kindergarten classrooms use indoor and outdoor gardens, nutrition lessons, cooking demonstrations, food tastings, farm visits, farmer talks, and a culminating hands-on Farm Day to integrate farm/food/health relationships into the curriculum. Topics include family-school-community partnerships; health, safety, and physical education; reading, writing, speaking, and listening; science and technology; and environment and ecology. Big books and other resources help teachers coordinate lessons. “Growing Vegetable Soup”, “Eating the Alphabet,” and “Diary of a Worm” are among the books used.

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### **Description, continued**

- ▣ Kindergarten students cultivate fresh vegetables, and they taste foods they may not have otherwise tried. A local farmer visits each school to plant pea sprouts that the students harvest and eat. Lessons focus on whole food snacks as much as possible. In the 2008–09 school year, Owen J. Roberts kindergarten students experience local foods in many ways, and they are encouraged to make intelligent food choice. They focus on five behavior outcomes:
  - Eat a variety of foods;
  - Eat more fruits, vegetables and grains;
  - Eat locally produced foods more often;
  - Become comfortable with basic food preparation and safety; and
  - Be physically active.
- ▣ Kindergarten teachers and partners use fun and behavior–focused nutrition education strategies to increase acceptance and preference for healthful and local foods. Educational trips for parents and students to local farms include the Milky Way Farm. Maysie’s Farm and Conservation Center also supports the program. Kindergarten Farm Day, a hands–on educational field trip in May that is planned and provided by high school agriculture students, provides:
  - Opportunities for students to apply what they have learned about the grain chain;
  - An opportunity to become “farmer for a day” and take products to market;
  - Hands–on exposure to farm animals, local foods and butter–making; and
  - An interactive concert.

### **Advice**

- ▣ Food allergies present challenges with experimental food programs. We work to be as inclusive as possible, but not every child can participate in every activity.
- ▣ It is expensive to provide healthful snacks — at least one dollar per day per student. Delivery fees compound the expense.
- ▣ It is ambitious to provide this program district–wide in 16 classrooms and 5 schools. The program could not succeed without volunteers and a dedicated grant manager.
- ▣ It is a concern that students are not motivated to continue the habits they adopt in kindergarten. Our next step is to introduce a nutrition program, “There is a Rainbow on My Plate,” to district second graders.

### **Evidence of Success**

- ▣ At first, teachers were extremely cautious to adopt the program due to so many demands and priorities that already seem overwhelming. After one year, the results, including parent/student feedback, were so positive that every teacher embraced the program. Many teachers noted behavior changes in their students when provided with healthful snacks.
- ▣ The kindergartners are easily motivated to learn how to be healthy.
- ▣ Students react to food offerings in the classroom differently than they may at home. They look forward to trying new things.
- ▣ Students ask their caretakers to provide the healthful snacks they sample in the classroom. Many families would never have tried hummus, carrot cookies, or even vegetable soup. Parents ask for and use the recipes used in school.

