



PLANTING SEEDS FOR THE FUTURE

ON

a cold day in late January, 20 or so adults and five children sit on folding chairs gathered in a circle, at one end of a room that appears to serve as an auditorium, cafeteria, and gym. They call out vegetables: tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, kale, carrots, onions, garlic, pumpkins, cabbage, rhubarb, green beans, and eggplant, among others. They discuss installing cold frames, building vertical gardens, growing mushrooms indoors, holding a pickling workshop, and growing carrots in clear containers.

These are the community members, teachers, and parents of children at Elizabeth C. Brooks Elementary School in New Bedford, Mass., who are joined by the school's principal and a School Committee member. They are planning what to grow in the school's first community garden this spring.

WRITTEN BY ABIGAIL HEVEY // PHOTOGRAPH OF ZOË HANSEN-DIBELLO BY LUCKI SCHOTZ





OË Hansen-DiBello, the Grow Education program coordinator from the Marion Institute,

writes everything down in a notebook while she tries to engage everyone in the brainstorming session.

Every so often, she asks Ashley Brister and Bill Braun, the two consulting farmers, if a certain vegetable will work at this school's garden. And they answer yes or no, according to whether it requires a lot of maintenance, or takes up too much room, or only grows in the hot summer months when school isn't in session.

Brooks is the sixth school the Marion Institute has worked with to plan and develop a community garden. Almost nine years ago, Desa Van Laarhoven, executive director of the Marion Institute, started the organization's first in-school community garden at Sippican Elementary School in Marion, Mass., and soon after built a community garden at Wareham Middle School in Wareham, Mass. With two successful gardens on line, the institute hired Hansen-DiBello to manage the emerging program. She brought gardens to Southeastern Regional Vocational-Technical High School in South Easton, Mass., Global Learning Charter Public School in New Bedford, and Hayden-McFadden Elementary School, also in New Bedford.

Hansen-DiBello's experience with Hayden-McFadden "was an opportunity

to really observe within the public school system," she says, and "that's when things kind of shifted in terms of program mission to really look at New Bedford."

Hayden-McFadden is located in one of the most vulnerable areas of New Bedford; it is also one of the largest schools in the district, and 79 percent of the students receive free or reduced lunch. The state has declared the school a Level 4, which means it is underperforming and not meeting educational requirements and is at risk of state takeover. The team felt if they could make the project a success in this environment, then they could do it anywhere.

"We created this vision where New Bedford public schools, urban agriculture,

"a garden question was on the MCAS last year and the kids didn't do too well on it because they didn't have any context for it. So the teachers are excited that this year they'll understand it."

The Marion Institute has a five-year plan to bring community gardens to all New Bedford schools, starting with the 20 elementary schools, expanding to the three middle schools, and finishing with the high school (also in turmoil over its Level 4 standing with the state). Currently it is working with Brooks and John Hannigan Elementary in the city's South End.

Each school develops its garden to meet its individual needs. For Brooks it's about collaborating with the community, holding classes outside, and developing

curriculum around the garden, while Hannigan focuses on family and parent engagement. Hansen-DiBello says that many of the children who attend Hannigan live in loud and chaotic home environments, so many teachers are enthused about the chance for children to just sit in the garden

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and connecting to our indigenous cultural roots in growing foods was a staple of our public school system," says Hansen-DiBello.

One of the best things to come out of this project is the energy it brings the teachers, Hansen-DiBello says. While the project's main goals are to introduce children to nutrition and new vegetables and help them reconnect with nature, it also aims to provide teachers with the chance to have fun and remind them why they became teachers in the first place. Hansen-DiBello says the teachers are also excited by how much the garden ties into the curriculum. The teachers told her that

and be still and quiet.

"In many ways we are where we were 100 years ago," says Dr. Rose Hayden-Smith, who works for the University of California, Cooperative Extension, Ventura County. An expert on community gardens, she has had a distinguished career, including roles as strategic initiative leader, Sustainable Food Systems; 4-H Youth, Family and Community Development advisor; and Food and Society Policy Fellow.

Hayden-Smith said many of the goals of the earliest school gardens mirror those of today, from bringing children closer to nature to consuming more fruits and

vegetables and having a better understanding of where food comes from.

Hayden-Smith said that school gardening originated in Europe in the early 1800s, and the first American school garden may have been created in 1891 at the George Putnam School in Roxbury, Mass.; this model was studied and replicated around the state. School gardens became very popular at the turn of the century, and during World War I and World War II, school gardens and victory gardens were abundant.

However, after World War II, school gardens began to lose steam as the country experienced great prosperity, a rise in the suburban lifestyle, and more refined and packaged foods. But as the environmental movement grew through the 1970s, it brought the movement back, and there was another boost in the early 1990s, says Hayden-Smith.

“My sense is that [school gardens are] enduring, and the trajectory we’re on now is going to be more institutionalized because of new economic models—that actually aren’t new—such as CSA models, farm to table, and farmers markets. There is also an awareness about food that didn’t exist before.... People are sharing information about food and the food system; people are more knowledgeable.”

The Marion Institute’s long-term goal is to see these schools introduce composting to the children and to use the garden’s produce in the school’s lunches. Although that will take time, the group can revel in the fact that it is widening the scope of the students’ lives and introducing new experiences.

Regina Durant, a kindergarten teacher and one of the two teachers leading the project at Brooks, has a planter in her classroom in which she plans to grow flowers and herbs; her children also grew pots of winter wheat that they have already taken home. Durant sums up the project nicely, saying, “It’s a great opportunity to introduce them to a whole wide world of food because everything is not just peas and carrots.” ★

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