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Census 2022

COMMUNITY-BASED OUTDOOR
& ENVIRONMENTAL LEARNING

HARVEST FEST CASE STUDY

Stratton School, Franklin County
An exemplar of Community Relationships

“Harvest Fest is another way to have our doors open to the community and to have those connections. Anytime you can get community members or family members into a school in a positive setting, it’s good because it’s an encouraging environment that the families feel, and the kids feel. I think it’s deepening the relationship between the school and the community.”

—Anne Flight, Art Teacher

Inside of the growing dome various food is grown such as the tomatoes pictured.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

In 2015, the school board at Stratton School approached the teachers and asked if anybody was interested in starting raised bed gardens in the front of the school. Katie Wuori, the 6th grade teacher, and Tabitha Emery, the 1st grade teacher at the time and now principal, happily agreed. A member of the school board, Dave Richards, and Millie Howard, the Volunteer Coordinator at the time, then wrote a grant proposal for Let’s Go 5-0-2-1-0 through Maine Health which they received. Getting everything started was a team effort, with fifth graders digging up the topsoil and grass, community volunteers setting up the beds over the weekend, and first graders planting the seeds. For the first couple of years, it was just Wuori and Emery, but more and more teachers became interested, which prompted them to write another grant for nine additional raised beds, all of which they made organic. In 2017, they were looking for a way to celebrate their gardens and vegetables with the community, so they decided to hold the first-ever Harvest Fest. Since then, they have hosted the community celebration and dinner every year in the Fall. This event has grown in popularity each year, with attendance currently reaching about 150 people. Flight notes how most years when it is time for Harvest Fest to start, the line to get in the school is out the door. To accommodate the high level of interest and success of the program, Stratton continues to grow its resources and even installed a growing dome from Growing Spaces in Colorado to extend their growing season and the ability to produce more food.

THE PROGRAM

On the night of Harvest Fest, the school is buzzing as everyone completes last minute tasks to prepare a meal for their beloved community. Flower bouquets are on each table from various personal gardens of attendees. There is a strong emphasis on local, Maine-sourced ingredients at Stratton School and they try their best for all the food at Harvest Fest to be local. In order to do this, they commonly modify recipes, such as replacing sugar with maple syrup. Since they currently serve around 150 people on the night of Harvest Fest, their gardens aren't quite big enough to grow everything at the school. To supplement their own supply of food, they reach out to the community and ask for donations of vegetables. Many individuals and farms in the area donate food and other items. For example, when the main dish in 2017 was lasagna, Maine Grains donated flour to make homemade noodles. They also make their own butter each year using milk from Oakhurst, which the kids love doing. The kindergarten students even have a song specifically for doing this, which provides an opportunity for movement and engaging different parts of their brains to facilitate learning. There are always many salads at Harvest Fest that feature the fresh vegetables they grew, which is a source of great pride for the students. When students are sharing the meal with their family, they often get excited to show them what dishes they made and explain where the food came from.

The students are responsible for every step of the process that goes into holding Harvest Fest. This includes planting everything in the garden in the spring, maintaining the garden, harvesting, prepping food, and serving it. This helps the students to thoroughly understand where their food comes from and to be able to give back to their community. Students regularly take cooking lessons throughout the school year in order to help them get comfortable preparing



their own food. They also do many taste tests, such as comparing carrots they grew themselves to carrots from the grocery store. The school also uses the students' close involvement with the food and what they like to help drive decisions about what to plant. If they know students really love a particular food, they try to incorporate it into school lunches more. Anne Flight, the art teacher, facilitates various projects that are another way for the students to contribute to the event. The students create labels in front of each of the dishes, a welcome sign right when you walk into the building, and a mural hanging in the cafeteria.

Stratton has a full-time garden coordinator who teachers are able to sit down with and discuss upcoming topics and lessons where it might be helpful to incorporate an activity in the garden. For example, if a teacher is focusing on geometry, they might organize an activity in the garden around graphing and figuring out area and space and how to split up the garden. Greater Franklin Food Council (GFFC) also sponsored Wuori and three other colleagues, Selina Warren from Kingfield Elementary School, Sarah Reynolds from Cascade Brook School, and Laura Hoefft from GFFC, in developing a curriculum called Growing Gardeners that is designed for PreK through eighth graders. The lessons start in the spring, the beginning of the gardening season, and go all through the rest of the year. Within this curriculum, there are pathways ranging from how to get started with no budget to push-in programming with an established garden and nutrition program. It contains standards-based cross-curricular lessons modeling how to garden and hit learning targets at the same time. There are strategies for teaching outside, games, STEM connections, and tried and true kid friendly recipes with nutrition information. Wuori says the goal of this curriculum is to give schools that are interested in incorporating gardening a starting point and take some of the work off their plate.



Growing dome at Stratton School from Growing Spaces in Colorado.

BENEFITS

Through Harvest Fest and the gardening programs at Stratton School, students gain a thorough understanding of where their food comes from and become comfortable preparing it. Flight notes that more and more students are eating vegetables and are excited about it. One year they were unable to have kale chips due to logistical reasons, and she remembers how disappointed the students were. The students also benefit greatly from regularly spending time in the garden at their school. When asked what they like about the school garden, a 2nd grader said, "I like the garden because it's a really nice place to be and it smells good and there's a lot of good vegetables to eat." A 4th grader noted, "I love nature and I love to help too, so it's a good combination because I get to see nature and I get to help the garden."

Harvest Fest also benefits the greater Stratton community. Wuori says during the COVID-19 pandemic, they tried to do takeout meals in place of the event, but they quickly learned that the community was not lining up for the food itself. Rather, they wanted the chance to sit down and have a family-style meal, be part of the community, and celebrate healthy living and all the hard work of their kids to bring the meal to the table.



SUPPORT & PARTNERSHIPS


Stratton is a small town but the community is extremely supportive, which has helped the project's success. Many people in the town have their own personal gardens, including Wuori, Flight, and Richards. These members of the community grew up eating fresh, local food instead of processed foods and it is important to them to share that lifestyle with the students at Stratton School.

The community is committed to Harvest Fest, donating food and other materials, fundraising, as well as volunteering their time throughout the year. One parent who is especially interested in the project even contributes their own expertise in fundraising to help. Other parents volunteer by taking care of the garden in the summertime, along with other community volunteers. Further, the dome and gardens need maintenance work done periodically, which volunteers complete. Stratton School is also located right next door to a lumber mill that gives them specific types or pieces of lumber upon request. Maine Agriculture in the Classroom has also sponsored different events such as having Bernie the Bug Man come and talk to students about pest management in and around gardens. Greater Franklin Food Council organized a group called Schools Integrating Nutrition and Gardening (SING), which Stratton School is a part of and now consists of ten different schools in Franklin County. Finally, they have received continual funding from Sugarloaf Community Trust.

Food offered at Harvest Fest, including carrot top pesto, whole wheat sourdough bread, buttermilk ranch dressing, and garden vegetable salad.

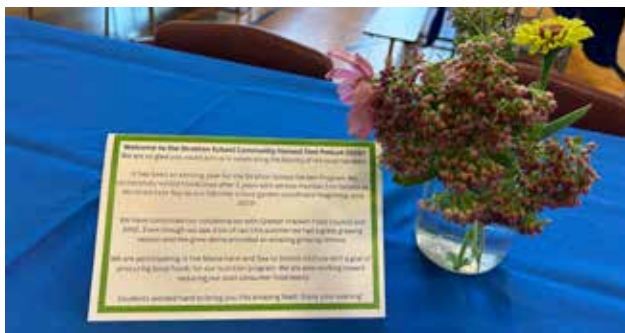
LESSONS LEARNED & NEXT STEPS

Harvest Fest would love to continue to find ways to expand the actual night of Harvest Fest and include more activities for families and students since it is one of the only times during the year that most families are gathered in the same place. Flight has also done Empty Bowl Fundraisers in the past, which involved making clay bowls in the art room and raffling off the bowls with the proceeds going to local food banks. She would love to include this on the actual night of Harvest Fest in the future, so families have the option to get their meal in a handmade pottery bowl and take it home with them all while contributing to a local charity.

Wuori and Flight are also focused on the sustainability of the project and ensuring that it will continue even without them. Wuori emphasizes that it is important to make sure your project fits with your community and the people in it to support its sustainability — and Stratton’s commitment to agriculture and gardening make this project well-positioned to continue into the future. 



Students and staff huddling together to make a plan to welcome their community.



Welcome message placed on all the tables during Harvest Fest.

PRO TIP >

“Go slow. Use your community. You can go to the transfer station and get pots and go to your local nursery and get a bag of soil and some seeds, and just throw them in a window in your classroom and see what happens. That’s where you start. Don’t think you have to do everything. And if things die, then it’s a great science experiment, because you can figure out why. Or if they lived, then that’s even better.”

—KATIE WUORI, Stratton School



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