

Growing for Equity in the Suburbs: Using school gardens to address equity issues



Mounds View
PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Community Education



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Session Objectives

1. To explore how gardens can be used to address equity issues beyond food insecurity/access.
 2. To identify some key project planning considerations that enhance equity.
 3. To identify some resources for sustaining gardens over time.
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Equity – the difficult, defining 21st century education issue

1) Equity IS NOT the same thing as Equality:

Equity requires disproportionate resources.

2) Equity has nothing to do with equality of outcomes or conditions, but rather access and capacity regarding opportunities.

3) Equity is both pragmatic and ephemeral, conceptually.

eq·ui·ty *ek-wi-tee*, noun.

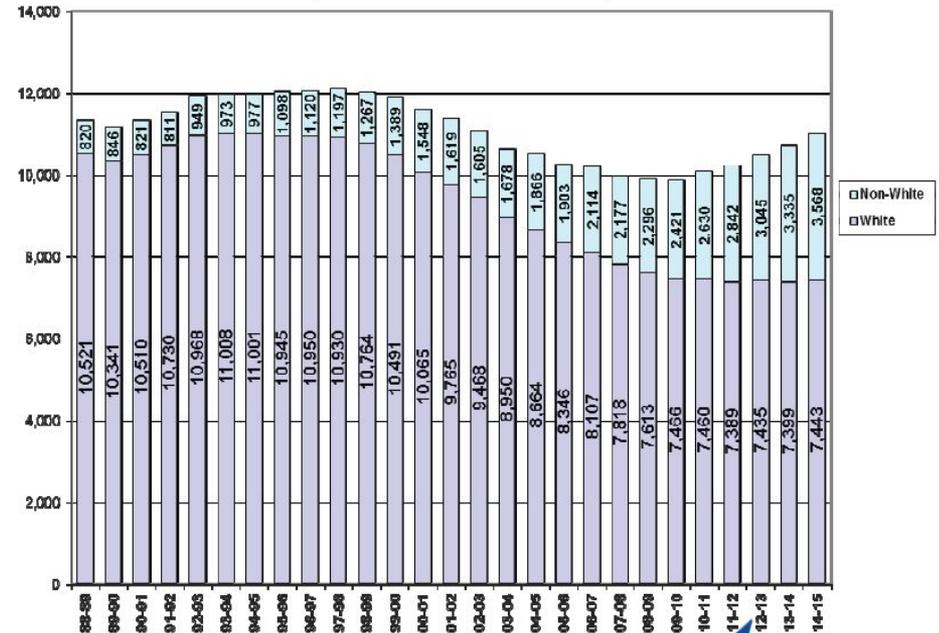
Just and fair inclusion. An equitable society is one in which all can participate and prosper. The goals of equity must be to create conditions that allow all to reach their full potential. In short, equity creates a path from hope to change.

Lake WoeBeGone, err, I mean, Mounds View Public Schools

- 20 years ago, largely homogenous student population, high performing, middle to high socioeconomic status - “all the children are above average.”
- Today, diversity demographics have increased 4.5X, Free and Reduced Lunch qualifications have nearly doubled.
- However, district still skews heavily white, middle/upper class.

Enrollment Demographics

District Pk-12 Enrollment



Mounds View's Equity Promise

The Promise:

- Programs and services will be in place at all schools to ensure that race, class and disability will not predict students' success in Mounds View Public Schools.
- Student academic performance will not fall into patterns identifiable by factors such as race, ethnicity, English language proficiency, socioeconomic status and disability.
- The school that a student attends will not be the predictor of his/her school success.

Examples of the Promise in Action:

- Early College credits available to all students at BOTH high schools
- STEAM programming at ALL middle schools
- Free ACT testing for all Juniors
- Policy changes minimizing or eliminating “ability to pay” considerations
- Heavy investment in professional development around culturally sensitive teaching, grading practices, etc.
- Demographic parity in advanced course enrollment
- Teacher evaluation system based on collective leadership and responsibility for all students

MN Racial Inequities, the Suburbs and Invisibility

MN consistently ranks worst in the nation for all measures of racial inequity: health, income, housing, educational achievement, incarceration, etc. Numerous studies bear this out, so I won't belabor the point here.

However, because the state skews so solidly white, middle-class and highly educated, such inequities are not immediately apparent unless you're looking for them or live in very specific, defined neighborhoods. As such, inequality is most apparent in the inner cities or in rural MN.

As such, many inequity issues remain invisible in suburbs, despite data to the contrary, due to:

- 1) Statistical skewing and less clearly defined geographic segregation;
- 2) Different, less overt presentation of issues (highly mobile V "out in the street" homeless, for example);
- 3) Outright NIMB denial ("Those things don't happen here");
- 4) Prior history/demographics/performance in relation to other MN communities and averages ("good enough is the enemy of great...and truly equitable").

Hunger Issues in the Suburbs

Food Insecurity is rising *faster* in the suburbs than in the inner cities.

A Pioneer Press analysis of enrollment data found the number of low-income students in the suburbs of the seven-county metro area climbed 64 percent from 2005 to 2015. Now, nearly 130,000 suburban students, or 33 percent, qualify for free or reduced-price meals, up from 20 percent a decade ago.

(http://www.twincities.com/education/ci_28980413/poverty-twin-cities-suburban-schools-increasing)

A different kind of “food desert”:

Cost and Transportation barriers to *quality*

- Most food relief services are concentrated in the inner cities.
- Lower cost farmers’ markets (St. Paul) are in the cities.
- Farmers’ markets in the burbs tend to be more expensive and oddly scheduled for working folks.
- In the burbs, quality produce costs. On limited income, when having to make a choice, 81% of surveyed families in poverty choose unhealthy food to stretch dollars.

Gardens in Mounds View

Thought Exercise: Barriers to Engagement

Part 1 - Partner up and share:

In your experience with gardens or any project, what are the biggest barriers to participation?

Part 2:

Keeping in mind your answers from Part 1 in mind, if you were going to start over, how could you ***change your design*** to remove/mitigate those barriers to participation?

Elements of “Everybody’s Garden” Project

- Funded by MN State Health Improvement Program (SHIP) Grant
- 11 gardens, one at each district building from K to grade 8 (not at high schools)
- Each garden = 4 4’X8”X2” raised organic beds (untreated cedar, with “supercompost”) and tools.
- Used as outdoor classrooms, via MN standards aligned curriculum
- All harvest supports the Ralph Reeder Food Shelf, (possibly) the only public access food shelf run by a school district in the nation.



Ongoing Supports

- 2 year coordinator for each building, Community Organizer model
- District Mail delivers food to the Food Shelf during the school year
- District Service Learning Coordinator's budget provides for replacement tools and annual plant purchases, for sustainability
- Garden Support Website:
 - [Everybody's Garden Site](#)
 - Contains aligned K-8 standards in all content areas
 - Variety of stand-alone curriculum
 - Community expertise resources
 - Public Impact Tracking database

How the Gardens support Equity

- Fiscal and Age neutral LOCAL opportunities for involvement.
- Active, labor opportunity to support, thereby countering easy philanthropy attitudes.
- Eliminates logistical barriers for participants.
- Age and developmentally appropriate opportunity for K-8 students, where other opportunities are limited for this demographic.
- Serves as sustainable platform for community partnership.
- Laboratories that connect classroom to social conditions and MN heritage.
- Students have multiple opportunities, from K to 8, to engage with the local issues of food insecurity, and multiple opportunities to learn about available supports, thereby countering “NIMB” perspectives and attitudes.

Advantages/Sustainability

- 1) No transportation costs (except for building to building partnerships).
- 2) Amenable to building specific modifications and/or purposes.
 - a) Outdoor kitchen
 - b) Expanded beds: number, disabled accessible, etc.
 - c) Pollination or meditation gardens.
- 3) Easily sustainable structure, after initial construction costs.
 - a) Plants, via district Youth Development and/or Curriculum budgets.
 - b) Free compost via Ramsey County, for future soil amendment, and on-site composting.
- 4) Perpetual forum for community partnership projects. Examples:
 - a) Parent Cultural outreach events
 - b) Student interest clubs (Gardening and conservation clubs)
 - c) Youth development leadership opportunities.
 - d) Transition (5-6 grade, 8-9 grade) activities opportunities.

Future Expansion/Leverage Efforts

- In talks with the Mayor's Office of New Brighton and a local seminary to open a monthly or bi-weekly, low cost farmers' market on weekends, to alleviate access issues (based on St. Paul's farmers' market).
- Involving student leadership groups, based in equity intervention efforts, in both garden maintenance and public outreach, as Healthy Food/Community Garden ambassadors to local rental landlords, lobbying them to allow plot gardening on their properties.

Final Equity Take-Aways

- Food cuts across all cultural barriers, and is therefore a perfect venue for any equity efforts/activities.
- When implementing any infrastructure, like a school or district garden, consider the potential benefits of installing smaller, but more numerous, sites rather than a large “showplace” installation.
- When engaging in any community support activities, work in the beginning planning stages to ensure the project can include as many diverse community members as possible and look to remove barriers (age, income level, etc.) via design. It’s more efficient than trying to adapt after the fact, and sends a better signal to all constituents from the onset.

Bottom Line

Far too often, we plan service projects for maximum benefit to the recipients of the service, and that's logical. However, to promote sustainability over time, the experience and access of those working to provide the service need to be addressed from the beginning stages of planning. By doing so, projects can long outlive their originators.

Make it accessible, make it easy, make it active.

For further information

- For Service Learning, reference the National Youth Leadership Council - nylc.org
- Greg Herder, Service Learning Coordinator
 - Mounds View Public Schools
 - greg.herder@moundsvIEWSchools.org
 - 651-621-6089
- Youth Development Levy statute: <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=124d.20>

THANKS MUCH!