



Licking County

School Garden Provides Access to Fresh, Healthy Foods for Students

At a Glance

To increase access to healthy foods for students, the Licking County Health Department's Creating Healthy Communities (CHC) program partnered with a local public charter school to install a school garden. Par Excellence Academy, which serves grades K-6, is located in Newark where over 23 percent of families are living in poverty, putting children at risk for poor health outcomes as they become adults (ACS, 2011-2015). The school garden provides students with access to fresh, healthy foods and the opportunity to try new foods they may otherwise not experience. Now, 260 students at Par Excellence will have access to fresh, healthy food starting in 2019.

Public Health Challenge

According to the 2017 Licking County Community Health Assessment, over 38 percent of adults in Licking County are

obese, which is significantly higher than the national Healthy People 2020 goal of 30.5 percent. An additional 32 percent of residents are overweight. Obesity rates are especially high in households making less than \$25,000 annually, which is approximately 20.9 percent of the population. These individuals were found to be 45 percent less likely to be physically active than individuals living in households making more than \$75,000 annually. According to Licking County Health Rankings, 17 percent of children live in poverty and 38 percent are eligible for free reduced lunches. In the City of Newark, 23 percent of families are living in poverty and 27.8 percent of youth — or 3,380 children — live in households with public assistance such as food stamps, SNAP benefits, or free/reduced lunches. Par Excellence Academy is aware many students may be living at or below the poverty level and are not receiving fresh, healthy foods at home or have the opportunities

to try them. Not only does the school face the challenge of students living in poverty, but since the school receives food through another school district's food service, they also face the challenge of having little control over what foods are chosen for their menus. The school does provide snacks where they try to incorporate healthier options, and they visit the local food pantry for fresh produce when possible.

Approach

In an effort to provide access to fresh, healthy foods to students, Par Excellence Academy partnered with the Licking County Health Department's CHC program to build a school garden. The school had been growing herbs and vegetables indoors using aeroponic tower gardens, but the school wanted to design a unique outdoor space for hands-on learning, gardening, and socializing. An outdoor garden would also give the students the opportunity



to grow more produce with the potential to bring it into the school for students to enjoy. The school strives to create a healthy environment for its students in and out of the classroom where they can teach healthy lifestyle habits. Early in 2018, the school envisioned an outdoor garden space where students could learn about where foods come from, gardening skills, and healthy eating habits. CHC worked with the school to plan and purchase supplies to create the space. Various size garden beds were purchased to allow enough room for all grade levels to have the opportunity to grow food and tend the garden beds. Inside the classroom, kindergartners received education on where foods come from and did taste tests with different foods. Fourth through sixth graders received a survey asking them about local foods, where foods come from, and exposure to local foods. The school also participated in the Great Lakes, Great Apple Crunch in October to highlight local apples donated by a nearby orchard. For some students, this activity was their first exposure to eating a whole apple or tasting a fresh apple from a farm.

“I learned that the plants grow from the ground. My favorite vegetable I’ve tried is broccoli”

—Ashlyne-Student

What’s Next

The Par Excellence Learning Center is the non-profit arm of the school. They are also partnering with the school garden by providing a grant to develop the garden, as well as incorporate a mentorship program with students beginning in the spring of 2019. The partnership will continue work on the garden and incorporate education inside

the classroom. Students can look forward to a hands-on experience working in a garden, learning how food grows, and trying new foods in 2019. Students will have more opportunities to try new healthy foods and develop healthy habits through the school garden.

Results

Thanks to funding from the CHC program and the help of volunteers, the school now has an outdoor school garden and supplies to fully implement a school garden in 2019. In the fall of 2018, 64 kindergartners tried different fruits, vegetables and cheese. Approximately 150 students received education about local foods and gardening. Most students who completed the survey recognized food comes from farms and think farms are important. Overall, results from the survey were positive. A few of the questions revealed the following:

- 79 percent of students know food comes from a farm.
- 69 percent have gardened before.
- 82 percent believe a healthy diet includes a variety of colorful fruits and vegetables every day.

During the 2018 school year, messages about the new school garden were shared in the school newsletter and on social media. Parents are already expressing interest in participating in the school garden with their children or how they can help.

Find Out More

Communities and schools can work together to increase access to fresh, healthy foods. If you are interested in learning more about strategies to increase access to healthy foods in your community or school, consider joining the Licking County Wellness Coalition. The coalition works on healthy eating and active living strategies through out Licking County with the vision of healthy people living healthy lifestyles.



“Having this garden in place has given us the ability to have all 260 students and faculty taking part in not only learning the benefits of eating healthy but also having hands on lessons specified towards how to maintain a healthy source of food and sustain it from the soil to the seedlings, to picking plants for all of us to share. We will be using all our beautiful bounty to replace snacks and for lunches in our school as they are attainable.”

— Taylor Cooper, Volunteer:



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