

The Parkdale Community Garden: Urban Gardening for a Healthier Future

By Marylène Perron and Katherine Dimas, English Montreal School Board

“I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.” – Mother Teresa



Schools can help create the roots of a better future for all students. Community offers concrete problems to be solved. By coming together, school and community can offer students opportunities to develop knowledge and skills that will make an impact. The story behind the Parkdale Community Garden demonstrates how powerful the school and community connection can be.

Parkdale Elementary School, located in a low-socioeconomic area of Montreal, serves a multicultural community: 85 per cent of parents were born outside of Canada and 60 per cent of students speak another language beyond English or French at home. These families face various challenges due to immigrating to a new country— isolation, getting used to winter, and learning to cook different foods, just to name a few. As parents struggle to adapt, they look to the school to help them support their integration. Quickly, the school realized it could not and should not do it alone. To tackle this complex situation, there needed to be a conscious effort to bring various partners together.

Five years ago, it was noted by many that students from Parkdale were facing multiple health challenges: poor eating habits, poor dental hygiene and high levels of stress. The school, its newly created Community Learning Center, and community organizations launched the 5 on 5 initiative to try to instill healthy living habits in students. At the beginning, the main focus was on early intervention in the younger

grades. Students and parents were both the focus of our efforts.

In September 2012, the school nurse and teachers hosted a series of hands-on workshops focusing on healthy habits supporting school success, such as regular bedtime, adding fruits and vegetables to diet, playing outside and adding physical activity to the family schedule. Furthermore, participants were also offered a variety of food items that were suitable to bring as a snack. To break isolation, an after-school collective kitchen was established at the local health services center (CLSC). During the winter months, parents and children met every month to cook recipes with produce that may have been unknown to them. The goal was to make cooking fun and to introduce families

to what was available in their neighbourhoods' grocery stores.

The next step consisted of the introduction of gardening to students and parents. In the spring of 2013, the Parkdale Community Garden was created in partnership with VertCité, an organization involved in promoting environmentally-friendly initiatives. With support from their staff, lessons took place for students to understand the growth cycle of plants. They learned that, with time and care, a little seed can produce food. Students also started composting on a small scale.

Every year, we developed a planting cycle. In the spring, the students plant their seeds. They follow the growth of the seedlings and plant them in the garden



when they are ready. Parents are invited to join their child for gardening time. It is amazing how parents of some of the most challenging students willingly come to school for this activity. We meet parents we would never see otherwise, and many participate every year. During the summer, volunteers come to water the garden and pick the produce when it is ripe. In the fall, a harvest festival takes place to celebrate the efforts of everyone involved in the project. Volunteers and school staff cook for the students so they can taste the various vegetables found in the garden. For many of the students and families, this discovery of tastes is something totally new.

During the last school year, workshops on kitchen basics and international cooking lessons were added. This way, students get introduced to new fruits and vegetables, learn how to cook them and are given the tools to make better choices. In addition, the school garden has been reaching the community through a volunteer program and the distribution of produce to a local food bank. Last summer, 130 kilograms of food were given to the community. On an environmental note, in 2015 and 2016, the garden

has been officially recognized by *Espace pour la vie*, a Montreal organization that includes the Montreal Botanical Garden, for the impact it has on biodiversity in Quebec.

Furthermore, to provide our students and our neighbours with an attractive space to hang out, an outdoor classroom was also created and two gazebos were added to generate shade. To solve the problem of flooding in the yard every spring, an arboretum was inaugurated to provide shade in the future and to naturally reduce the amount of water stagnating in the yard. By adding trees known to need lots of water, we are hoping to decrease the amount of water found in the yard, allowing students access to every area of the schoolyard all year long. As an urban school where access to nature can be limited, it also means giving students access to a green and safe space.

As this program is entering its fifth year, we can now start witnessing the results of this initiative. Students are bringing healthier snacks to school and they eat more fruits and vegetables than before. Professionals are noticing improvements in dental hygiene. Parent involvement in activities has

increased and reading scores have reached levels no one could have predicted.

Moreover, the school's reputation in the community has become more positive and additional partners are seeking to get involved with us for different projects. By bringing school and community together and working hand-in-hand toward the same goal, we are making a systemic impact that will hopefully be long-lasting. ○

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