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FEATURED

Growing young minds: Meridith-Dunbar garden aims to improve students' nutrition

BY JOEL VALLEY | TELEGRAM STAFF Nov 25, 2019



Dennette Gardner, a professional school counselor and family engagement coordinator at Meridith-Dunbar Early Childhood Academy, is starting a garden near the school campus in East Temple.

Joel Valley | Telegram

Dennette Gardner, a professional school counselor and family engagement coordinator at Meridith-Dunbar Early Childhood Academy, has a passion for gardening – and the possible educational advantage it can provide children.

“I always had a real sincere belief that children need to be outside and know more about nature,” Gardner said. “We put a teacher in a classroom with four walls and maybe they have a window ... we tell the teachers to explain the world to a child but put them between four walls. We need to be outside and experience things ... to see it, touch it and smell it.”

Gardner is working toward bringing a community garden to the land behind Meridith-Dunbar, and stressed how this venture can have tremendous effects on the development of young minds. Meridith-Dunbar, 1717 E. Ave. J in East Temple, is in a food desert, making it difficult for residents to obtain healthy foods.

“I really notice a brain grows through nutrition,” Gardner said. “We’re at these early stages and if we don’t give real food to those brains, they won’t come out the same way. So children in poverty need good nutrition.”

She and her team have envisioned a garden where nearly everything is edible.

“We want to start with edible trees and edible bushes for the fence,” Gardner said.

Although this community garden is a new project for Gardner, it is all but an unfamiliar endeavor, as she has helped institute a campus garden in Killeen ISD before transitioning to Temple ISD four years ago.

Through Gardner’s efforts, Meridith-Dunbar received an abundance of gardening supplies over the years. Now students are able to learn about and grow vegetables, including tomatoes, eggplant, kale, Brussels sprouts and cauliflower.

“I wrote a grant and got it from Temple Education Foundation,” Gardner said. “We bought a lot of kitchen stuff, so now we can go to the garden, harvest and take it out to our kitchen area.”

The students wash and prep what they harvest, and head to the washtub to clean any dirty dishes — an activity Gardner said the students enjoy the most.

“They’ll stay in the washtub forever ... and we all have little aprons on and we just have an experience with it,” Gardner said.

Students have learned how to whip up a variety of foods, and the program has received guidance from Temple Independent School District’s nutritionist along the way.

“Now when we give them something healthy to eat; it’s not always ‘yum’ since it’s not sugar,” Gardner said. “Our TISD nutritionist Miranda Rhodes has been a big part of our partnership and even taught the students how to cook eggplant French fries.”

Christine Parks, TISD's chief of communications and community relations, relayed how this has been a wonderful experience for students.

"Most kids this age don't understand the farm to table process and so for them to actually experience what it looks like is just amazing and incredibly fun to watch," she said.

Gardner also has cultivated a relationship with the Bell County Master Gardeners from Texas A&M's AgriLife Blackland Research and Extension Center, and emphasized the importance they have played in teaching, designing and planting.

"We needed a mentor because we were learning by making mistakes but thought it would be nice to speed up that learning curve," Gardner said. "So we've had a wonderful relationship with the Bell County gardeners and consider them really good friends now."

This relationship will be beneficial as Gardner works to make this community garden project a reality.

"We want the whole community to get involved," Gardner said. "It brings community together. They take ownership and get the kids involved, so that we don't have vandalism. It'll just be a beautiful place to be ... a Garden of Eden. That's just our hope and dream."

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