

## **ROSS GARDEN AND GREEN THUMB CLUB BRING SCIENCE LESSONS TO LIFE**

Young minds are not the only things growing and blossoming at Betsy Ross School. There's also a bountiful crop of fruits and vegetables tucked in a courtyard near the playground, thanks to the hard work of the Bulldog Green Thumb Club.

Second- and third-grade classes that are part of the club grow seedlings in their classrooms in late spring, then plant them in the Ross Garden just before school lets out for the summer. Harvesting takes place in the fall.

"Our goal is for kids to be involved in all the stages of growth, and even taste some of what we produce," says third-grade teacher Angie Levato, who leads the club and organizes the activities, along with second-grade teacher Stella Geller. They invite other teachers to get their students involved. There are usually up to 12 different classrooms helping with the garden and taking part in other Green Thumb Club activities.

"This club is not only an exciting opportunity for students, but it reinforces our science curriculum for second and third graders, which includes topics like the study of the plant life cycle, traits of plants, seeds and roots," says principal Craig Curtis. "They are able to see the processes they study coming to life right in their own garden."

Levato says the Ross Garden has produced tomatoes, peppers, carrots, cucumbers, squash, pumpkins, potatoes, asparagus, herbs – even some flowers. A highlight is when students do "taste tests" in their classrooms after the harvest. Sometimes they even get to bring vegetables home to try with their families.

Curtis says the Ross Garden adds "a touch of community and family engagement" to the school. "Not only does it bring classrooms together toward a common initiative, but it also brings families into the picture. Each summer, families can volunteer to take care of the garden for a week-long span. What a great way to build community while also showing one of the school's core character traits of responsibility."

## **SULLIVAN CHALLENGE BUILDS LIFELONG READERS**

Anne Sullivan School has found a fun and creative way to expand students' reading horizons and get them to explore new and different genres – the 40-Book Challenge. The program is part of the school's effort to enhance literacy during the crucial fourth- and fifth-grade years, when it's so important to foster a love for reading that can last a lifetime.

All students are challenged to read 40 books throughout the year. Their selections must span a variety of color-coded genres, such as historical fiction or mysteries. When they finish each book, they either submit a recorded book talk or take an online comprehension assessment. At the end of the year, Sullivan holds a celebration for everyone who has made it to 40 books.

Teachers publicly celebrate when their students reach the milestones of 10, 20, 30 and 40 books. They also get recognized during weekly schoolwide announcements by principal Traci Meziere. “They love the recognition. And it really spurs the interest,” says fifth-grade teacher Laurie Travis. “They start fifth grade knowing about the program and excited to begin reading. We’re only a couple months into the year, and many kids have already read 15 or 20 books. They are eating it up.”

“This is one of many ways we strive to build a culture of readers at our school,” Meziere says, pointing to 20 Book Bingo for fourth graders as another example. The bingo squares include things like “a book that teaches me something new,” and students have all year to read and fill their boards as they go.

Meziere says the school also enjoys a strong partnership with the Prospect Heights Public Library, with librarians regularly presenting to staff and students. Fifth graders recently took a walking field trip to the library and toured the newly renovated space.

This fall, Sullivan’s own library/media specialist Betsy Yager set up a “book tasting” for staff. They explored “menus” that featured several genres, then sampled a variety of books and reserved the ones they were interested in for their classrooms.

“Our students are at an age where teachers have a big influence on them. So the adults in the building really model a love of reading,” Meziere says. “Our goal at this grade level is to keep and grow their interest, exposing them to a lot of variety, so they become lifelong readers.”

### **‘WE’RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER’ – SEL CURRICULUM TEACHES SKILLS FOR LIFE**

During the formative years of elementary and middle school, students are developing behaviors and interpersonal skills they will draw upon throughout their lives – such as building positive relationships and managing their emotions and stress. That’s why District 23 has prioritized social-emotional learning (SEL) and is launching a new, innovative curriculum called Second Step this school year.

Second Step is a comprehensive SEL program that starts with simple lessons in pre-k and builds on those learnings as students progress all the way through eighth grade. “We’re now using the same language across the District, in structured activities as well as learning that is woven throughout the day,” says Eisenhower School principal Luke Lambatos, who served on the curriculum selection committee, along with other administrators and teacher representatives from every grade.

He says the committee researched several options and chose Second Step because “it is steeped in research and is a well-crafted program that schools can build on year to year.” The curriculum includes units such as developing a growth mindset and goal setting, emotion

management, empathy and kindness, and problem solving. There's also a bullying-prevention program.

For the District's youngest students at Eisenhower, many of the Second Step lessons are covered during daily "morning meetings" (pictured above), when teachers discuss behavior expectations and check in with how children are feeling that day. Lambatos says he's already seeing great results in pre-k and first grade, including richer classroom discussions and staff members using new tools to help support students and teach important skills.

Lambatos says having a strong SEL curriculum supports academics and is especially important as children are dealing with the mental health impact of the pandemic. "We want to have a positive learning environment where everyone feels safe and secure, ready to learn and able to process the outside stressors in our world," he says, adding that SEL enhances the school community and emphasizes that "we're all in this together, whether it's a pandemic or any other challenge."

## **MIDDLE SCHOOLERS EMBRACE RETURN OF CLUBS, MUSIC AND SPORTS**

Middle school presents an opportunity for students to explore their interests and passions – or find them – through extracurricular activities. That's why MacArthur has always provided a wide range of options that appeal to its large and diverse student body. This fall, with everyone back in the building, the school has been pleased to bring these opportunities back, and students are embracing the chance to get involved.

MacArthur offered some extracurriculars last year, including shortened basketball and volleyball seasons and virtual clubs. But this year the school has returned to a full menu of activities, including basketball intramurals and cross country; band, orchestra and chorus; a robotics team; and clubs devoted to yearbook, newspaper, art and innovation, to name a few.

The response? "More than ever, kids want to be part of something," according to principal Camron Nystrom, Ed.D. "The limitations of last year have contributed to the huge interest we're now seeing."

MacArthur tries to capture many interests – including sports, writing, STEM, the arts and fitness – and design opportunities that complement the work done during the school day. It's part of serving "the whole child," which is important when students are trying to figure out who they are, who they want to be. "They need more than class time to do that," Nystrom says, adding that extracurricular involvement also helps students connect with each other, as well as with adults they can trust. Another benefit is many students discover interests in middle school that they carry with them into high school and college, even careers.