

"This is Mullein, also known as cowboy toilet paper because cowboys used it to, well, you know," Bella, 4th grader, proudly shares with a group of district employees visiting to see El Monte's gardens. "You can also dry it, chop it up and make it into tea. It helps if you have a cold," Faith, also 4th grade, adds. Faith and Bella, two members of the Green Team, continue to lead their guests through the school stopping to share favorite plants or stories. Their guests murmur in surprise and delight as their young docents lead them to the milkweed and tell them about the monarch butterfly caterpillars that made their homes in the leaves earlier in the year.

More teachers, and district personnel than ever before are being drawn to what El Monte is doing and want to replicate it at their sites. When visitors arrive, they often exclaim over the large "bus circle" garden, as well as the resident chickens, greenhouse, and composting program El Monte boasts.

El Monte, a Title 1 school in a lower income area of Concord, Ca, was once a blank slate just begging to be transformed. It took the vision of Christina Boman, principal, to start the transformation. She began by sharing with teachers and support staff all the benefits a school garden could bring to the school, showcasing the learning that could happen on another stage, other than the classroom. Once teachers started seeing the vision, they became excited too.

The community was another set of stakeholders that began to see the value in a garden. The school's PTA supported this initiative by giving money for supplies and materials to build the garden. Mrs. Boman also leveraged community volunteer groups to start the extensive facelift of the front, circular, lawn area that would become the first gardens. These groups, such as T-Mobile, and Kaiser, provided the muscle and human will to do all the heavy lifting like cutting and removing the sod, building and filling the garden boxes, mulching, and putting in the drip.

El Monte originally partnered with the CARES program, a federally funded after school program which provides homework help, nutrition lessons, gardening, and structured recreation to over half the school's students. The CARES program provided a school gardener to perform maintenance and to teach students how to plant, propagate, and compost. In addition, they used their bounty in their food program and taught the "Harvest of the Month," as part of the nutrition aspect of the program. Students in the program stay until 5:45 pm daily and are fed a snack and dinner.

As the new Co-Administrator, I came on board three years ago, just as budget cuts hit the CARES program and they lost their gardener. As an avid gardener, and permaculture enthusiast, I was able to pick up where CARES left off and provide an enthusiasm for learning about the environment and sustainability in students. Last year, we partnered with Garaventa, the local waste management company, to start a composting program school wide. Garaventa provided the totes and picks them up twice weekly to compost the waste materials off site. The Green Team teaches students about composting and helps students sort their food waste at lunch time. Whenever the school needs compost, Garaventa provides them fresh material that was once El Monte food waste.

The Green Team is a group of students in grades 3-5 who not only help with the composting program, they meet with me after school on a weekly basis and learn about permaculture. This year, we were excited to start using Matt Power's Permaculture Student curriculum. We often watch his videos, learn a

lesson about seed saving, plant propagation, soil health, composting or another of myriad topics permaculture has to offer. We then apply our new found knowledge in the garden. This year, each student has their own seed bank, a shoe box uniquely decorated in which students keep seeds they have harvested from their plants. Students often bring seeds from home to trade with each other. Luis, third grader, shared, "trading seeds is more fun than trading Pokemon cards because they grow."

The Green Team also brainstorms ways we can help the fifth graders raise money for Outdoor School, a weeklong camp they attend annually if they can raise the money. This is often the first time students have been away from home. Every May, the fifth graders spend a week learning from naturalists who take them on day-long hikes through the redwoods, nearby wetlands, and the beach. They also go on night hikes and participate in a town hall experience. It is a week that will be remembered for a life time. This year, the Green Team grew seedlings and held a successful fall plant sale to benefit 5th grade Outdoor Ed. They plan on repeating their sale again in the spring. The students on Green Team take pride in their stewardship and are excited when one of the plants they grew sells to benefit the fifth graders. Caitlyn, third grader, shares. "In a couple years I will be a fifth grader too. I hope the Green Team will do this for me so I can go to camp."

As the school transitioned to the Common Core, the gardens became more and more of a focal point as teachers implemented more kinesthetic modalities of learning to keep students engaged and excited. Teachers can often be viewed with their classes in the garden teaching science or math lessons, or just reading with their class in the sunny afternoon air amongst the swaying sunflowers. Members of the El Monte community are welcome to stroll through and harvest food for their families as well as pitch in with maintenance of the garden in the twice annual garden days. Parents and younger siblings enjoy watching the chickens scratch for bugs while they wait for the bell to ring. The amount of community engagement and participation has grown tremendously since the installation five years ago.

So what's next? El Monte is looking to constantly add more pieces to their comprehensive program. We are looking at installing more water catchment, and expanding our gardens to include more foods in cafeteria lunches. The implementation of an in-school garden teacher to teach Next Generation Science Standards to all students on a weekly basis is being explored. The CARES program continues to integrate their nutrition program and to manage gardens at the rear of the school. When students are asked what they want to be when they grow up, many enthusiastically exclaim, "I want to be a farmer and make the land happy again." Yes, the future is looking bright.

Jennifer Molino

Co-Administrator, El Monte Elementary School

www.elmonte.mdusd.org