

Footsteps Child Care, Inc.

SCHOOL GARDENS FOR SCHOOL WELLNESS: PARTNERING FOR HEALTH

CASE STUDY | 2014



THE NEED: ACCESS TO HEALTH

Footsteps Childcare Founder Karen Haas-Foletta has made health and wellness a foundation of the Footsteps program, always keeping an eye on ways to serve an increasingly diverse population of families and children. Footsteps Childcare provides before and after-school care and summer enrichment programs for a diverse range of families: from those whose parents work at Google, Oracle, and other tech companies to those who are low income and even homeless.

Founded in 1994, Footsteps set out to serve families at Cipriani Elementary School in Belmont, CA and has since expanded dramatically; today, attendance averages 600 children and 75 staff per day spread across eight sites in Belmont and Redwood City. **With expanding operations to include a broader, more socioeconomically and ethnically diverse population, Karen was simultaneously becoming more aware of the importance of food and exercise to overall health, and on Footsteps' role in making the healthy choice the easy choice.**

“Gardens are one of many ways—along with access to physical activity, healthy snacks, and parent education—to start [children] young on the path to developing healthy habits.”

-Karen Haas-Foletta

Her research on how to improve the health of her students led her to connect with *Get Healthy San Mateo County* and eventually to the Bay Area Nutrition and Physical Activity Collaborative (BANPAC) to develop a wellness plan for children, families, and staff. She immediately removed juice from students' afterschool snacks and set her sights on developing gardens at each site as part of a longer-term wellness strategy.



THE SOLUTION: COMMUNITY GARDENS

Karen began the development of gardens at two sites: Nesbit Elementary and Barrett Community Garden. Using funds from the 2014 Get Healthy San Mateo County grant, she refreshed these two existing gardens, constructed three new gardens at Cipriani Elementary, Redwood Shores Elementary, and City Center Plaza in downtown Redwood City, and hired a part-time garden specialist.

Karen and her team organized multiple workdays with parents throughout the year to facilitate both the initial set up as well as ongoing maintenance, utilizing a combination of garden boxes built by volunteers as well as pre-assembled boxes. The Cipriani garden, in particular, is designed as a working classroom—with tree stumps for students to sit on during a lesson—and students at all sites make weekly visits to the gardens. The leadership team conducted pre- and post-tests of children's knowledge about and interest in gardening in order to help gauge the impact, and staff often uses produce for snack time and sends produce home with families.

THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT FOR SUCCESS: PARTNERSHIPS

Thinking creatively early on about partnerships and coordination with the City and the school district whose facilities they share has been vital to the success of the Footsteps gardens. These partnerships have the potential to make or break the project, along with the investment of dedicated site staff. **“We learned very early on how essential it is to have someone at every site personally interested in the garden. When someone isn’t invested with an intrinsic passion, the reality is that there is so much else going on that the garden won’t get the attention it deserves and it won’t have the impact we’re aiming for.”**

“Children are intensely fast-learning and emotional, however the change we see doesn’t happen overnight. Through observing the students while they’re eating lunch, for example, you hear how their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors are changing. Children who thought they hated tomatoes, for example, try them from the garden first and then show up with them in their lunch, proud that they have influenced their parents to make a healthy choice.” - Janette Wernick, Garden Specialist



CHALLENGES

Reflecting on the challenges of the project, Karen admits that it is hard to maintain the garden year-round. This is in part due to issues of volunteer capacity—having enough parent and community support to devote the time necessary to keep a garden thriving—as well as weather conditions that challenge plant growth.

It has also been difficult for Karen to attract an audience to parent education seminars. She attributes the seminars’ low attendance to competition with other demands on parents’ time such as other school events and work commitments. She is determined, however, to figure out what works to extend the reach of the gardens’ benefits beyond the children themselves.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

“We’re still trying to get teachers to take up using the garden [at Cipriani]. It’s about finding the right person, and while we haven’t been successful yet, we’re still trying for it.”

In addition to encouraging wider use of the gardens throughout the school day, Karen has goals of securing funding for greenhouses, increased outreach for parent education, and more hours for the garden specialist. While the gardens, as they are now, have been successful at sparking interest and highlighting a focus on health and wellness, continuing to enhance and integrate garden education is the key to shifting attitudes and behaviors.

