



# Garden Case Study

## East Aurora School District 131

Grades involved: PreK - 12

Enrollment: 14,061

F&R: 100%-CEP

Year started: 2014

Garden type(s): 38 hydroponic tower, 5 outdoor food, 1, orchard, 2 pollinator (with herbs)

Garden use: food service, education, donation

Critical players: School science eco/green teams, designated maintenance worker, Pre-K and science teachers, Kane County Health Dept., AmeriCorp volunteers, outside consultant

Education connections: tower gardens inside classrooms, Pre-K utilizes gardens and pumpkin patch as classroom, summer programs tend garden, Special Education uses year-round, culinary program, Harvest of the Month

Community connections: food pantry on-site, Blessings in a Backpack, parent involvement

Funding sources: VNA Health Care, Kane County Fit for Kids, USDA Farm to School Planning Grant, ISBE Healthy Communities Investment Act Grant

Outside support: Illinois Farm to School Network, AmeriCorps

Beginning with an initiative from VNA Health Care's outreach program, East Aurora School District 131 sowed the seeds of their first garden in 2014. This salsa garden at the High School quickly grew into the Tomcat salad garden and was followed by four more farm to school gardens, two pollinator gardens, and 38 hydroponic tower gardens! These include an orchard and a pumpkin patch. The process has been a "very organic feel" for the district.

The gardens produce a variety of harvests of fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Some produce goes to the district food service and supports their "Fruity Tuesdays" and "Veggie Thursdays" that coincide with **Harvest of the Month** celebrations. Beaupre Elementary is one of the district's shining stars and has its only orchard, which is expected to provide its first fruit harvest this spring! Other fruit from their garden is used for "Smoothie Tuesdays" at the school and parents are invited to join. Grants Coordinator Dr. Margo Schmitt and ECO Club Adviser Karie Nash have both been vital for facilitating the gardens and involving students. The Pre-K teachers at EASD 131 Early Childhood Center are also active, using the gardens and pumpkin patch for ECE education: "the flexibility of the Pre-K curriculum has allowed us to be more creative." When school isn't in session, summer programs take care of the gardens and Special Education utilizes them year-round.



Effective planting and harvesting with longer cold seasons has been a challenge recently for the gardens, resulting in an abundance of hardy produce like zucchini and tomatoes last year. However, nothing went to waste: "They always said make lemonade out of lemons, so we made tomato sauce out of tomatoes!" says Schmitt, sharing that tomato sauce was frozen and used in school lunches. The High School's culinary program and ECO Club also took advantage and teamed up to make zucchini bread for the Aurora GreenFest, selling \$1,300

worth. They later received a request for more bread from a woman who was pregnant when she purchased the bread and craved it afterwards - must be delicious!

Understanding the importance of food security and healthy community outside of school, EASD 131 added a food pantry with cold and dry storage during the renovation of the East High School cafeteria. Excess produce from the school gardens and food service items that cannot be re-served (i.e. unopened milks) stack the pantry alongside other items like books, diapers, and feminine care products. Students and their families have access to the pantry at any time, and it's open to the community three days a week through a separate door for easier access without having to sign-in at the school's main office.

In addition to the VNA Health Care initiative, EASD 131 received funding from the **Kane County Fit for Kids**, the **USDA Farm to School Planning Grant**, and the **ISBE Healthy Communities Investment Act**. Through the USDA grant, the Illinois Farm to School Network was able to provide support; the garden maintenance worker and consultant are both also paid via grants. EASD 131 recently became an AmeriCorp school district and volunteers help sustain the tower gardens during the school year and over breaks. Other programs through **Midwest Dairy** and **No Kid Hungry** have also been integrated.

