



# Pacifica School District

## THINKING OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM

CASE STUDY | 2015

### THE NEED: RAISING EDUCATION STANDARDS

High educational attainment means kids can grow up to be highly educated adults and live healthier and longer lives. In Pacifica, almost one in three adults has a high school degree or less. To improve education and therefore health outcomes, the local school district and tight-knit community prioritized educational achievement.

In 2013, the Pacifica School District adopted the “5 C’s” framework to develop education skills in collaboration, communication, citizenship, creativity, and critical thinking. Building upon this framework, Pacifica School District decided to think outside of the traditional classroom and create outdoor garden

“We’re that important?”

-Fourth grade student

classrooms throughout district schools for education and recreation. Having received 2014 Get Healthy SMC funding to start school gardens, the district applied for 2015 funding to take these school gardens to another level of learning.



### THE SOLUTION: THE HANDS-ON APPROACH

Research shows outdoor learning improves academic success and helps students feel more connected to their school. Giving students voice, choice, and ways to engage in their own learning creates a higher



degree of feeling connected. The outdoor classroom project was implemented in all seven Pacifica School District schools to cultivate student engagement and implement the 5 C’s. Students gained hands-on experience and participated in inquiry based science projects. The project brought together school gardens, NGSS (Next Generation Science Standards), and Project Based Learning (PBL), where students designed the outdoor classroom within parameters (budget, space, etc.) and the winning designs were selected based on student or staff feedback were created.

Students learned about plant life cycles, photosynthesis, nitrogen fixing, composting, water ecology, soil ecology, seed propagation, organic food growing and harvesting. They also learned about harvesting healthy food and how healthy food access could influence their food choices.

The project also included quarterly trainings and support meetings for school garden coordinators, parent volunteers, teachers and principals on topics from irrigation to sustainable gardening. Local nonprofit Pacifica Gardens also provided seedlings and technical expertise to schools with less parent volunteer support.

## THE ESSENTIAL INGREDIENT FOR SUCCESS: STUDENT & TEACHER EMPOWERMENT

Teachers, students, and parent volunteers made this project possible. Parent volunteers assembled benches, tables, and helped facilitate the project. One parent, a UC Master Gardener, volunteered to lead workshops for the garden coordinators.

There were several indications of success. Aside from district and teacher support for the project, integrating district strategies such as the 5 C's, PBL, incorporating the NGSS, and gardening helped make this a success. Teachers really liked giving their students a real budget to work with, allowing students to share their ideas of how to use the money to improve their school.

Pre and post surveys were distributed to students to measure problem solving and critical thinking skills in a hands-on setting. Students reported liking working together to blueprint the outdoor classroom and ensuring the most efficient use of the funds, and overall were involved, engaged, and excited. They felt important and empowered and had instant buy-in.

### CHALLENGE: CONFLICTS & VISIONS

Before beginning a project like this getting feedback and input from the people that will be implementing it is incredibly helpful so everyone has a clear and common understanding of the purpose and plan. Garden coordinators and teachers also sometimes had different ideas for the outdoor classroom. If this project could be done all over again, having a more open-ended project would have helped since each school had specific needs.

### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Students' voices are incredibly important – they can easily get lost in the logistics. It doesn't take a lot of money for students to improve their school in some capacity. Any project that gives students an opportunity to actively participate in a real world project will be successful – and a little seed money can help motivate the teacher and the student.

Pacifica School District is picking up the cost of the garden coordinator stipend (\$100/month) to ensure there are coordinators at each site, and continuing committee meetings and working with teachers and students in the garden. Garden coordinators have also written and received grants to expand work at their school and there is a plan to send interested coordinators to the UC Santa Cruz Lifelab Program and working with the HEAL project.

The District will continue teacher workshops on using the garden as an outdoor classroom, with a focus on the NGSS. There will also be a professional development day for Defined STEM, an online project based curriculum to teach the NGSS. The school board is also looking at funding after school programs in the outdoor classroom, such as healthy cooking classes. Meanwhile, teachers continue to bring their students out in the outdoor garden classroom for lessons to improve academic achievement.

To learn more about the Pacifica School District, visit:

<http://www.pacificasd.org/>

