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Success of Schoolyard Farming Enterprise Built on Collaboration

FoodShare partnership benefits school, teachers and students

The collaboration that built a schoolyard farming social enterprise in Toronto is largely responsible for its success, says Katie German, a schoolyard farmer, beekeeper and project co-ordinator.

Transformed students are amongst the enterprise's achievements. A student who at first wouldn't risk getting dirty by sitting on the grass could be seen two weeks later harvesting garlic heads, hands smeared with dirt, a huge smile on her face. The student said later she couldn't believe how much she had changed in a few short weeks, Katie recalls.

Students who struggled to arrive at school on time during the school year were eager to start at 6:30 a.m with the schoolyard farming program this past summer. It was clear the work was meaningful to them, says Katie.

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The summer 2013 School Grown project team.

The enterprise has also seen early financial success. While relying solely on donations and grants in past seasons, it operated as social enterprise for the first time this year. It made enough in sales to fully cover operating costs and pay start-up costs for next season.

The [School Grown project](#) works as a partnership between FoodShare, a non-profit dedicated to ensuring every city resident has access to good, healthy food, and

schools in the Toronto District School Board.

The project gives teachers access to an on-site, working, production focused farm. They can centre their lessons on hands-on work in the garden and meet curriculum expectations in a way that is meaningful and relevant to the students.

But the best part is that while they have access to the space, the teachers are not responsible for it, says Katie.

“Teachers have so many competing demands on their time, managing and maintaining a school garden can be tough when balancing all of their other work.

“The beauty of this partnership is that when the bell rings at the end of class, if we aren’t done planting out our collard seedlings, I can stay out and finish all the tasks related to production and farming, and the teacher can take the students inside and finish all the tasks related to the school day.”

In exchange, Katie, as project co-ordinator, has access to students to help meet the farm’s labour needs as well as the full run of an “incredible, resource rich, urban farm setting.”

The partnership also helps to solve a perennial question for schoolyard gardens — how to maintain the space in the summer months. “The non-profit/school partnership here is key,” says Katie.

Another element of the enterprise’s success has been creating value-added products that make good business sense and teach students practical skills, Katie notes. Canning and pickling is a great way to preserve the harvest when it is ready, teach students the vital skill of safely preserving their food, and the end result is a product that can be sold at a higher price than the raw product.

Pickled beets, hot sauce and green tomato chutney have sold well at the farmers’ market stall, according to Katie. There is also great fundraising opportunity in the canned goods.

Katie and her colleagues’ big dream — already dubbed Recipe for Change — is to see food literacy become a requirement for graduating high schools in Ontario.

They envision every school with a garden, a teaching kitchen and a healthy lunch program, “where food is prioritized and students get the skills they need to navigate our complex food system,” Katie says.

Related Story: [Schoolyard Farming Project Promising Food Security](#)

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