



The Iowa Policy Project

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School Gardens: Raising More than Just Food

Benefits Seen to Young Minds, Health, Taxpayers and Environment

IOWA CITY, Iowa (May 14, 2014) — Some “old school” techniques just might be the answer to a variety of challenges if Iowa schools were to promote and sustain their own gardens.

“It is the American Way to turn to school and home gardens during times of crisis,” noted Jenna Ladd, a research intern for the Iowa Policy Project and author of a new report. “Right now many are concerned about student health and learning — as well as budgets and environmental issues. As in the past, gardens could be part of the answer.”

Ladd’s report for IPP recommends a state-funded pilot project that would support a gardening project at 400 schools — a \$1,000 stipend for a garden organizer, plus \$250 for startup garden costs such as seed, compost and tools for each school.

“There is no downside to considering this option,” said Ladd, a student at the University of Iowa. “School gardens are a low-cost, effective way to educate young people about healthy food choices, all while promoting local food systems and preserving natural resources, in a fulfilling learning experience.”

According to Ladd, the popularity of community gardens — numbering about 18,000 in the United States and Canada — as well as home gardens indicate wider use of gardens in schools could gain support.

“We are spending billions — an estimated \$190 billion annually in the U.S. — to deal with obesity-related health costs, and child obesity is \$14 billion of that. We need to promote better nutrition choices by children, and giving them ownership in a school gardening program would be one approach to that,” Ladd said.

Find the report on the Iowa Policy Project website, www.iowapolicyproject.org.

Her report states that under the so-called “5-2-1-0” guideline, students should get at least five servings of fruits or vegetables each day, spend less than two hours before computers and television, get at least one hour of physical exercise and — for zero — consume no sugary soda or juice-type drinks.

“The choices children make now will carry on,” she said. “School gardens can help them make choices that will serve them well as adults.”

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There also is an environmental benefit, she said. As during wartime food programs, a strong school garden program supplying healthy, locally grown fruits and vegetables would cut down on the need for some food shipped from long distances.

“Growing even a portion of the lunches consumed by the 480,000 public school students in Iowa on schoolyard soil would lessen the state’s carbon footprint,” she stated, noting in the report that it was more than about lessening the transportation of food.

“Increasing plant diversity in an area of land allows that space to offer more ecological services,” she said. “These services include reducing water runoff into local waterways. There is a lot of asphalt and concrete on school property; that causes runoff. The root systems of plants, however, filter water and slow its return to main waterways, which prevents floods.

“Gardens can provide what children might now miss: a direct personal experience with nature, and a better understanding of real environmental issues.”

The Iowa Policy Project is a nonpartisan, nonprofit public policy analysis organization based in Iowa City. Reports are at www.iowapolicyproject.org, and other commentary is on IPP’s blog at www.iowapolicypoints.org.

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