



Students in the Farm to school program feed chickens inside the chicken enclosure at William Penn High school.



Farm to School a Bountiful Harvest



BY MATT AMIS

FROM SEED TO SOIL, from kitchen to plate. For the students at William Penn High School, the cyclical universe of agriculture and livestock has become a much more concrete one, thanks to the Farm to School program.

The program connects three Career and Technical Education areas (or “majors” that the school offers to students): environmental science, culinary arts, and agriculture. By aligning the once-siloed disciplines, students in each one receive a holistic perspective of the entire agricultural life cycle. Faculty members collaborate to ensure the entire system runs as efficiently as possible, and that students receive all-inclusive learning from each department.

To wit: this spring, agriculture students who run “Penn Farm” worked the four-acre fields and greenhouse to prep seeds and plants. Culinary students will assist with the harvest, and eventually utilize the edible crops into their own lessons, which may end up in the school’s cafeteria, or beautifully plated at a community foodie event. All the while, environmental science students help monitor and maintain the ecosystem’s overall

health—testing soil, hunting for insects, or planting native plants for the school apiary’s bees.

“The students really enjoy that they’re able to see the process from start to finish and how all of those disciplines intertwine,” says Karen Ferrucci, a William Penn agriculture teacher. “By seeing the full picture, they really enjoy finding their own niche in it. Some kids are all about tending to the chickens and gathering the eggs—that’s their thing. Some in culinary love cooking the ingredients, some love being outside and mowing grass. There are so many opportunities to find something you love, and it’s through a real-world experience and those hands-on skills.”

Farm to School has been arming students with direction and skills for five years. In that span, the program has grown to the point where today it provides more than 8,000 pounds of produce to community programs, cafeteria lunches, and culinary events. This includes the noteworthy accomplishment of a William Penn team being crowned champions at the Farmer & The Chef foodie-friendly fundraiser last year.

Superstars in Education

The good vibes emanating from the program has led to an uptick in student interest (enrollment in all three areas has grown steadily), and new opportunities for the staff for creative growth. Grant funding and school-, community- and district-wide engagement has opened even more doors for collaboration. The school added an aquaponics system to the mix, where goldfish and tilapia will live and provide nutrients to hydroponically grown produce.

Farm to School students and staff now routinely visit Colonial School District middle schools to impart their wisdom on the next generation of farmland stewards. Strong ties with Delaware State University and the University of Delaware have fostered a rotating slate of guest lectures, where professors visit with classes (and with students 1-on-1) to talk shop or about careers. And under their own roof, William Penn faculty have bought into the fun: ESL classes will visit animal cages to learn linguistic concepts like body parts, animal names or verb tenses; students involved in health services studies might check the animals' pulse rates; and the Penn Farm roosters have become popular models for the art department. "We have lots of chicken paintings and sketches on our walls," Ferrucci says with a laugh.

As Farm to School continues to increase its positive presence in the community, it's helping William Penn students prepare for life after graduation. Apart from the myriad hands-on skills, students will eventually be able to receive professional certifications while still in high school. Even today, as

Senior Elijah transfers chive seedlings to plug trays inside the greenhouse.



they begin to fill out college and job applications, they find they are more prepared than they imagined.

"They definitely get a sense of, 'I am a strong candidate in my community' for college or a career because they have those skills," Ferrucci says. "That's when they gain the understanding of what this program gave them." ■

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