

How Our Garden Grows

One of the hallmarks of a D101 education is the extension of learning beyond the classroom, delivering a holistic experience that has real life relevancy. It requires extra effort, by students, parents, teachers and the Western Springs community. One example of this support can be seen in how the community supports the Field Park Friends in the Garden extra-curricular activity and the Field Park Community Garden overall.

Nestled on the south side of Field Park Elementary School, the Field Park Community Garden began in 2010, with the objective to create a unique, hands-on learning environment in order to enhance the learning experiences of its students across varied curricular disciplines and grade levels. The initial concept was launched by a combination of D101 parents and staff and included Vie's chef Paul Virant. Since then it has been run exclusively by volunteer students, parents and D101 teachers.

The Western Springs community of parents has been an incredible, consistent source of support for the Garden. An Eagle Cub Scout built the initial garden boxes, and the drip irrigation maintenance has been donated by JRL every fall and spring. As a part of the 2015 school construction project, D101 added a sensory path that runs through the garden, and the Field Park PTO utilized a grant to pay for two benches inside the garden. A grant from the Western Springs Foundation for Educational Excellence (www.wsfee.org) allowed for the upgrade to long lasting composite beds, a garden table and gravel pathways. Most recently, Hinsdale Nurseries provided soil at cost to top up the beds.

Field Park teacher Ryan McLaughlin serves as the teacher sponsor for the Garden. Mr. McLaughlin has a knack for putting students' hands and minds to during and after school, helping them cultivate more than just a garden along the way. All Field Park students help start seedlings, grown in the hallways under grow lamps in late winter/early spring, for transplantation to the Garden in late Spring.

A formal extra-curricular activity was started in the Spring of 2021 - Field Park Friends in the Garden. In our very scheduled and fast-paced world, the Friends in the Garden allows individuals to "participate-as-you-can," which makes it not only especially inclusive, but also an opportunity for students to easily explore a potential new interest.

Two objectives of the Friends in the Garden are to highlight a "garden to table" experience for D101 students and also to encourage the interaction in a shared interest between the students and the community. Chef Paul Virant brought the first objective to life by not only utilizing the garden's vegetables to make a Caesar salad for club participants in September 2021, but also by hosting a seminar educating students about the farm-to-table concept. This past fall, vegetables from Friends in the Garden were used as toppings for pizza from Mother's Sourdough Pizza, courtesy of the Prim family, Western Springs residents who have a Field Park student and sell their pizza dough at the Western Springs French Market. The Garden students will be visited by the Western Springs Garden Club who will share their expertise about butterflies and other pollinators.

A well-known phrase is that “it takes a village,” and we are lucky to have a village of parents, students, teachers, schools and businesses all pulling in the same direction for the growth and development of our community. If you would like to participate in Friends in the Garden, the next meeting date is November 16, 2022. Please contact Emily Epstein, Chair, at emilyepstein76@icloud.com with questions. See you in the Garden.

