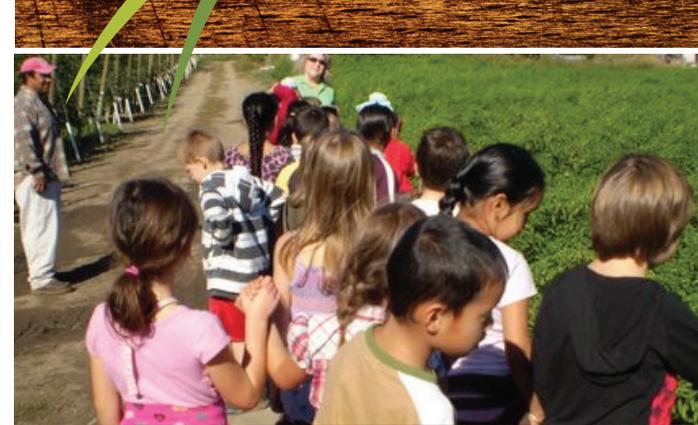


# Homegrown Success: Students in Oliver Learning to Love Local



Oliver Elementary has been running its Farm to School program since 2008 and today the program not only sustains itself, but also turns a small profit. It's also sparked the interest and imagination of the community and other school's in the district. Marji Basso, the school's lead liaison for the program says that over the last 6 years, running the Farm to School Program has provided the school with delightful surprises as well as many twists and turns.

"We've hit dead ends and we've hit on wonderful eureka moments. It's been a great journey."

The school's activities (which are facilitated by paid coordinator Natalie Wolfe, whose salary comes from program profits) include a popular unlimited \$3.00 salad bar with five vegetables and three fruit options as well as a hot portion with carbohydrates, dairy and protein. Over 67 per cent of the students participate in the salad bar. As much as possible the menu is built around what's available locally. Two dollars and seventy-five cents goes to pay the caterer, with the remaining 25 cents being funneled back into the program. If kids can't afford the lunch, community sponsors have stepped in to help.

*"Everyone gets out beyond the classroom walls—we like to get out and get our hands dirty."*

The school also offers a large expansive educational component they've designed themselves and even take on the road to other schools. "We have put so much effort into our educational component," says Marji. "We are not just reaching 150 kids who purchase meals, we're reaching 1000 kids who are now learning about growing food, opportunities to become farmers, and why local is important."

As part of the educational program, each year Oliver Elementary hires qualified teachers to come out and develop lesson plans directly related to school curriculums in science, health and career studies. From grade 1 students who learn about the growing stages of seeds all the way to grade 7 students who run advocacy

advertising and poster campaigns to build support in the community around eating local and supporting farmers, the program touches on many varied aspects of farming and local food.

During the school year students also take field trips to farms, orchards, supermarkets, food banks, community gardens and processing plants to better understand the local food scene. There is also a summer art program run in conjunction with the community gardens where students can take on projects like painting garden stepping stones and making birdhouses.

"We put a spark and then people figure out how to carry it out on their own," says Marji. "Everyone gets out beyond the classroom walls—we like to get out and get our hands dirty."

## **Budding Entrepreneurs: The Young Farmers Program**

This year, a new component will be added to the program to encourage students to grow their own food to sell. The idea came up when a local winery, Hester Creek, held their annual Garlic Festival where they allowed grade 7 student Azriel Starcic to have a booth to sell garlic she'd



grown. She confidently explained everything she knew about her garlic to interested buyers and sold out of all three of her varieties in under an hour, turning a tidy profit of \$100.

That's when a lightbulb went off for program organizers—what if other students could plan and grow food to showcase and sell at the festival next year? Hester Creek agreed to provide space for the students at next year's festival, and as an added bonus The Young Farmer's Market will be happening at Oliver Elementary School's "Meet the Teacher Night" in September.

"The kids are just raring to go, and we haven't even officially launched the program yet," says Marji. "One boy told me he's already researching what to grow, supply and demand and what foods will help him turn the best profit. We're pretty excited to see how it unfolds." The program



will be structured to encourage students to come up with a food producing plan and apply for a grant. Start up grants of a up to \$75 will be provided by the school to successful students.

#### Strong Community Partners

One of the special things about the Oliver Elementary Farm to School Program is how much community support they've garnered. A variety of organizations are strong sponsors for the program, including the Kiwanis Club, Valley First Credit Union and Hester Creek Estate Winery and more.

"Our wonderful community partners are just that—partners. They're way more than sponsors. They are people who really believe in what we're doing and really contribute. We aren't looking for handouts, but for people who really believe in our programs and want to be a part of them. Through the years we have become more confident



in sourcing partners and we are very lucky to have wonderful community support." Oliver Elementary Farm to School program exemplifies the three core elements of a Farm to School program: healthy, local food, hands-on learning and school and community connectedness.

Marji is careful to point out that though the program is a success, there have also been bumps on the road along the way. "It's been a fabulous journey but I want to also point out for schools just starting out that at first it was not everything coming up roses—there were a lot of things to overcome and challenges along the way, but through perseverance and partnerships with outside organizations, we've grown something we are all proud of. We couldn't do it alone—today we have a phenomenal coordinator, amazing volunteers, involved parents and above all, we're so excited to see kids showing interest in food and farming. It's been great for the students and we can only see it growing and evolving more."

