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November 11, 2011

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# How Does a Small Classroom Garden Become Part of a *Big* Solution

Posted: 10/17/11 05:40 PM ET

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Alarm bells are ringing nationwide regarding the rising obesity rates among children. Public figures ranging from first lady Michelle Obama to officials across the country are recognizing the severity of the issue and are looking for tangible ways to help reverse the trend. It can seem like a losing battle since kids are hit with a double whammy. First - easy, cheap and convenient access to junk food often outshines healthier choices ([ABC News](#)). Then, as kids become used to highly processed foods, healthy options seem tasteless by comparison.

Lots of attention in addressing this issue is rightly focused on school programs because students consume 30% to 50% of their daily calories at school. The solution seems simple enough -- properly fund school lunch budgets. But unfortunately with budgets as they are, on average we spend about 90 cents per day per child on ingredients -- less than many might spend on their pet's daily diet. Shocking isn't it?

That leaves a huge "nutrition" gap which explains the urgent need. There are many types of programs from lots of different organizations looking to help make a difference. Some focus on education (e.g. [Whole Kids Foundation](#)), others on cooking ([The Creative Kitchen](#)) while others like [Together Counts](#), introduce a balanced view lifestyle changes -- like family meals and activities.

Here's yet another example of an approach that gets at the root of the issue (pun intended). This program is called the "Ground Up Campaign" and it is about providing schools with indoor classroom gardens that let students grow and enjoy their harvests during the school year. I love this approach because it is a clever and cost-effective system for students to learn and appreciate the life process of food -- from seed to the table. Recent research done at the UC Davis Center for Nutrition in Schools, confirms the payoff in this low cost/high return type of program:

- Improves knowledge of nutrition, food preferences, and consumption of fruits and vegetables
- Allows for the integration of multiple subject areas
- Enhances overall academic achievement

- Provides children with an understanding of agriculture and the environment
- Improves life skills, self-esteem, social skills and behavior

That's why this program has a lot of fire power behind it. Conceived and led by Avis Richard, CEO of [Birds Nest Foundation](#). (a non-profit that provides video production and web-enabled content to numerous charitable foundations) it includes The [United States of Food](#), Grow to Learn NYC, [NYC Strategic Alliance for Health](#), The Green Bronx Machine and generous sponsors like [Botanical Interests](#), [Gilt City](#), [Health Warrior](#) and [Whole Foods](#).

The result is an integrated set of elements orchestrated to connect kids with the value of healthy foods. Each of the 100 initial schools in the program will receive a raised-bed garden with 8" of soil space, trellis, grow light, organic soil and seeds, gardening tools to grow an edible garden in the classroom. A companion curriculum developed by [Veggiagation](#) is included to ensure students gain knowledge of the life process in addition to hands-on growing experience.

As important, the program will include 16-year old role model, Dylan Richards, who is proactively making changes to his own lunchbox to help young people find better ways to eat healthy food that is still delicious. Dylan travels throughout the five boroughs addressing many nutrition related issues including poor food quality.

The "a garden in every classroom" approach is best summed up by Mud Baron, the former Green Policy Director for the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) whose name alone reveals his passion. His approach is simple: "Kids who grow good food, eat good food. Kids who cook good food, eat good food."

Sometimes it's the small things, like growing our own food that can make a big difference. Sometimes, big changes start from the ground up.

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