

Athens County

Growing Inclusive Communities Through School Gardens

Athens City Elementary Schools rebuild gardens after district restructuring.

Challenge

The Athens City School District (ACSD) has always valued the learning opportunities and access to healthy food that has come with having gardens on their campuses, but not every student could experience the benefits of the gardens. In 2018, when the ACSD announced they would begin developing a master plan that promoted equity at new and renovated school facilities, many people were left wondering what would happen to the gardens. The CHC Coalition, Community Food Initiatives (CFI), and the ACSD Nurse took advantage of this opportunity to advocate for new, permanent gardens at Morrison-Gordon and East Elementary Schools—gardens that would be equitable and accessible for all students.

Approach

To assess the level of interest in the new school gardens, the CHC Coalition distributed a survey to staff of the ACSD elementary schools and to the Beacon School, a nearby educational facility under the Athens County Board of Developmental Disabilities. In total, 57 teachers and faculty responded. All felt it was important to have gardens at the new sites, with 77% indicating that gardens were “very important.” Special Education teachers, aides, and counselors rallied behind the effort and provided many creative ideas for school garden usage. Teachers were similarly excited for a natural, outdoor environment for children to explore, play, and learn. Additionally, the CHC Coalition reached out to CFI, a garden design partner, to gain additional support. To create an accessible garden that would last many years, additional funding was sought and awarded from OhioHealth.

Results

Garden construction has begun, but it was delayed many times due to the re-construction of the main school buildings and the start of a new school year. Partners faced many challenges with finding a local vendor, but thankfully, a local construction company was identified, and the garden layout and base were completed just before winter. Additionally, a paved lighted path now connects the Beacon School with the garden at Morrison-Gordon Elementary. CFI will be implementing their “Sprouts” garden program and be providing education to the students. In Spring 2022, the garden infrastructure will be installed, with hopes that planting can occur before the end of the school year. While there has been delays that presented many trials, they created an excellent opportunity to share with students all the components that go into creating a garden.



At A Glance

The Creating CHC Coalition, Athens City School District (ACSD) Healthy Schools Committee, and the local PTO partnered with the ACSD to increase accessibility to school gardens and grow an inclusive community. Permanent inclusive gardens will now be located at the newly renovated Morrison-Gordon Elementary and East Elementary Schools. Upon the completion of the gardens, Community Food Initiatives will also be offering students their “Sprouts” garden program. The curriculum includes teaching children where food comes from, the connection between healthy gardens and healthy bodies, and a deeper understanding of the environment and sustainable agriculture.



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