

As featured in *The News-Press* - July 22, 2020

RCMA Immokalee Community School garden sustains and educates families in need



Matt Kaminski and Kris Locker Special to The News-Press

Published 7.00 a.m. ET Jul. 22, 2020

Note to readers: The News-Press and Naples Daily News partnered with an FGCU solutions journalism class during the 2020 spring semester. This is one in a series of stories the students produced.

With a school garden, the RCMA Immokalee Community School is empowering families by providing fresh food and gardening education for free.

In its second year, the RCMA school garden has involved students, teachers and families in an effort to educate and provide nutrition for the migrant, farm working community. Students are often sent home with fruits, plants and seeds, and their families are now starting their own gardens at home.

According to a research study on food system injustice, there is “prevalent hunger and obesity in low-income populations and exploitation of farmworkers.” The article proposes that basic human needs are not met in our current food system, and much of the solution to hunger and exploitation relies on educating students.

“This garden would not have been possible without Aetna Foundation and *The League Club of Naples*,” Juana Brown said, the director of charter schools at RCMA. “We had a dream, and we would have never been able to start this without them.”

Dennis Porter, RCMA’s physical education teacher and head gardener, said even after four years of teaching at RCMA he has never seen students so involved at a school. “This is the most incredible school I’ve ever worked in my 35 years of teaching,” Porter said. “This is my first year with the garden, but I just love it.” Although Porter had experience with the Lakes Park Community Garden in Fort Myers, he attributes the success of the garden to a learning mentality. “It’s just an experiment,” Porter said. “There are no failures here.” Schoolchildren are prone to

make mistakes. Even after a heavy rain, the children want to water their beds. Every day they want to plant another seed. “So this is what happens when you ask the kids to trim the tomato plants,” Porter said, laughing. “They over-trimmed it, but you can see how much the kids love it.”

Two years ago, organizations such as Aetna, UF IFAS Collier County, and the League Club helped fund the organic garden at RCMA. “We wanted an organic garden because we wanted it to be environmentally friendly and sustainable,” Jose Quintero, a fourth-grade student, said. According to Abigail Salazar, a third-grade student, the garden has



taught her and her classmates different skills to use inside and outside of the garden. “The garden has taught me how to take care of the plants, and not cause any harm to living things,” Salazar said. “It not only taught me how to take care of plants that are hurt, but even taught me how to take care of



people.” Collier Greens, the school and community garden network of Naples Botanical Garden, works alongside the school to hold interactive, educational activities. Recently, Collier Greens hosted a family planting day to showcase sweet potatoes. Porter invited the families from RCMA to help dig up the potatoes, and later they were able to take them home. Porter said the goal of this garden is to help the

parents be healthy too. “I remember one of the parents’ meetings, we had extra pepper plants,” Porter said. “I was able to give parents 40, 50 pepper plants. That’s what we’re trying to do now with moringa because of the health benefits. At a trip to ECHO Global Farm in Fort Myers, Porter learned that moringa seeds can purify water. Moringa can also be used to treat ailments such as diabetes and high blood pressure.

In Porter’s first year, the biggest challenge was that chickens kept coming in through the fence and would tear up the plants. After asking other gardeners for advice, Porter put up chicken wire at the end of November to alleviate the problem. “They would dig it up, then I’d replant,” Porter said. “A lot of the time, the kids wouldn’t even know. I had backup plants growing that I would use to replace the old ones before the kids would notice.



It was awful for a while with the chickens.” Porter has learned how to take care of the few chickens that still find a way into his garden, but today, plastic chickens near the compost symbolize the garden’s victory. “I call it, ‘Poultry in Motion,’” Porter said. “In an emergency, the chickens will fly. They usually do that when I’m chasing them.”

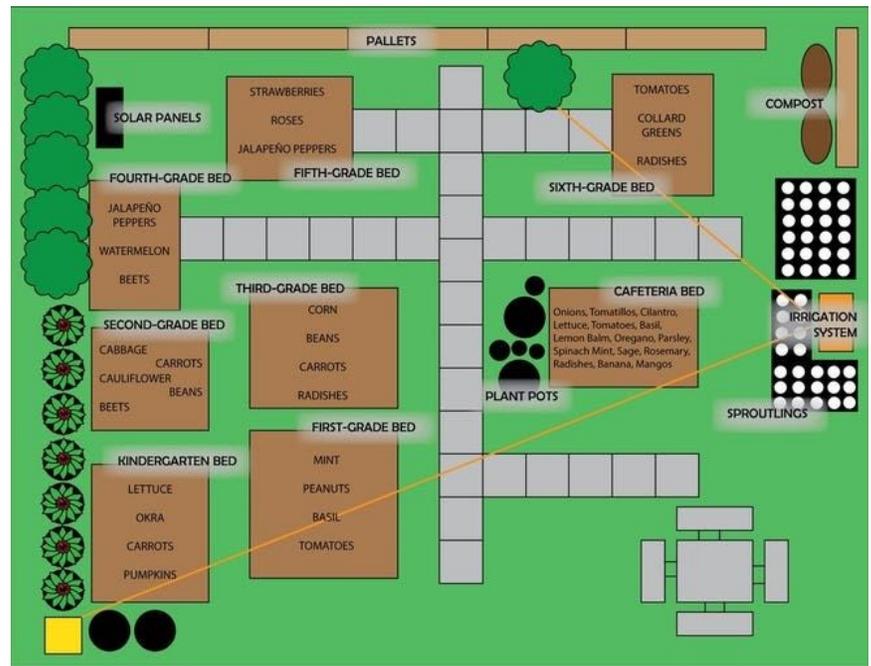


Another enemy of Porter’s garden are games like kickball. After a big blue ball came barreling through his garden beds, he looked to the playground at the usual suspects. “Those are the sixth graders over there,” Porter said. “That’s why I want to fence around the garden. The ball will come in and knock stuff over. They think it’s funny. But if they’re playing kickball and the ball comes over here in the garden, that’s an automatic out.” There are also

kindergartners, who represent a slow-moving army that Porter always needs to watch. “Since we don’t have a fence, I’m watching the kindergartners coming through picking the tomatoes,” Porter said. “They’d rip one out, throw it, rip out another. It’s funny, you have to love it.” Another memorable event was when an umbrella was uprooted from its post by wind and crashed through the garden. Many beds and the irrigation were damaged. “It’s all just part of gardening,” Porter said. “You learn from it, you redo, you replant. You just keep reaping what you sow.”

Patti Young, the director of nutrition and wellness for RCMA, uses creative initiatives at the school to promote gardening and healthy eating. “It’s literacy week at the school, so we’re having green eggs and ham during lunch,” Young said. The relationship between school gardeners and nutritional staff has benefited everyone. Eggplants were growing well, but students didn't enjoy them, so the gardeners made adjustments. “We’re finding what food works,” Porter said. “What they eat, what they don’t eat. The cafeteria, they’re telling me to grow more romaine for next year, not iceberg. They want more tomatoes, cucumbers.” The garden has become a regular part of the students’ diets, but programs have been able to provide more fresh fruit to the children when they go home.

Brighter Bites is a program that provides 25 pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables in to-go bags for students and their families. In Southwest Florida, RCMA Community School is one of five schools chosen for the program. The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program is another way RCMA provides students with fresh food. At the school, students get a weekly, healthy snack. Jicama, a student-favorite vegetable, is often included in a familiar form. But one day, Young had a surprise for everyone. “They get it sliced up in little matchsticks, and it's cold,” Young said. “I wanted them to know what jicama really looked like. So when I delivered it, they had a hard time because it doesn’t look anything like what they are used to.” Quintero and Salazar, along with many other students, thought it was a different vegetable. But quickly, they recognized the flavor and added Tajin seasoning, a blend of chili and lime, which Young said the students use with every meal. Nearly two years ago, Ozgur Dursun, a first-grade teacher, was the first volunteer to take over the garden. He set up the irrigation system and the first few beds. But the garden was a work in progress until donations came in.



The University of Florida IFAS Collier County Extension awarded the RCMA school \$600 the first year, and it has continued to donate since. According to Young, the partnership provided soil, taught them what to do and what not to do, and essentially got them expanding. The Aetna Foundation and The League Club each gave a grant of \$1,500 in the garden’s first year, and they have supported the garden since. From these grants, the RCMA garden started with \$3,600, providing funds for garden beds, irrigation, solar watering and compost. Porter says the garden has a ripple effect. Students have started their own gardens at home because of the education and practice at the school’s garden. For those who aren’t able to start at-home gardens, Porter shares information about fresh food markets and community gardens. According to Porter, some parents arrive at the school after a grueling day, but they're happy. Their children are in his garden hard at work, and many days, they are coming home with a bag of fresh fruit

The University of Florida IFAS Collier County Extension awarded the RCMA school \$600 the first year, and it has continued to donate since. According to Young, the partnership provided soil, taught them what to do and what not to do, and essentially got them expanding. The Aetna Foundation and The League Club each gave a grant of \$1,500 in the garden’s first year, and they have supported the garden since. From these grants, the RCMA garden started with \$3,600, providing funds for garden beds, irrigation, solar watering and compost. Porter says the garden has a ripple effect. Students have started their own gardens at home because of the education and practice at the school’s garden. For those who aren’t able to start at-home gardens, Porter shares information about fresh food markets and community gardens. According to Porter, some parents arrive at the school after a grueling day, but they're happy. Their children are in his garden hard at work, and many days, they are coming home with a bag of fresh fruit

The University of Florida IFAS Collier County Extension awarded the RCMA school \$600 the first year, and it has continued to donate since. According to Young, the partnership provided soil, taught them what to do and what not to do, and essentially got them expanding. The Aetna Foundation and The League Club each gave a grant of \$1,500 in the garden’s first year, and they have supported the garden since. From these grants, the RCMA garden started with \$3,600, providing funds for garden beds, irrigation, solar watering and compost. Porter says the garden has a ripple effect. Students have started their own gardens at home because of the education and practice at the school’s garden. For those who aren’t able to start at-home gardens, Porter shares information about fresh food markets and community gardens. According to Porter, some parents arrive at the school after a grueling day, but they're happy. Their children are in his garden hard at work, and many days, they are coming home with a bag of fresh fruit