

NOT JUST GROWING A GARDEN A school success story

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The compost bin is a permanent fixture in the Keene Central School Cafeteria. Situated next to the dishwasher, milk bucket and trash can, the bin has become not only a KCS claim to fame, but also the foundation of a deeper relationship to food: “good” food specifically is now part of the glue that sticks the Keene community together. Children line up and scrape their compost as normally as they throw out their milk cartons and run off to recess.

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Bunny Goodwin, a veteran KCS mom who has remained active in the KCS community, initiated the school’s compost program on Earth Day in 1995. The program was a response to the School Board’s complaints about dump fees. She writes, “I wanted to teach people how to manage their trash in an economical and environmentally friendly manner, thus developing a sense of stewardship for the land. It is a matter of learning new habits and what better place to do this than in a school.” The compost pile itself is out past the parking lot, in a solid, two sectioned structure built by students and parents. For the first and last eight weeks of school National Honor Society students can be seen making the daily drag from the cafeteria out to the pile. A hand truck laden with compost bin teeters over parking lot pebbles and grass bumps, only occasionally falling through watchful arms. The compost pile is turned throughout the year and eventually makes its way to the KCS garden.



The KCS garden now lies behind the elementary classrooms, guarded by Giant Mountain. The beds run parallel to the soccer field is so integrated into school life that it has its own rules: a softball hit into the garden in the air is a homerun – on a bounce and it’s a double. But, the garden is protected, protected by the community, the tradition, and the ethic it has helped to create in the students and community.

Each elementary classroom opens up onto two 4' by 12' raised beds. Behind the Kindergarten baby pumpkins will be seen growing adjacent to the first and second grades' corn, beans and squash. The third grade plants potatoes to make potato chips and fourth grade grows cherry tomatoes. Kale for chips will be seen poking out of the fifth grade plot, and the sixth grade focuses on carrots. As is, the garden provides some rhubarb, lettuce, garlic, carrots, cherry tomatoes, strawberries and asparagus to the cafeteria, though most produce is used in the classroom.

An After School Garden Club started by Bunny Goodwin meets one afternoon a week. They circle at the start and end of each session to talk about the garden, what they have done that day, and complete a journal entry, always snacking on something they have grown. Goodwin explains, "the garden is [...] not a place where we try to feed the school, the garden is an outdoor classroom for all students, incorporating not just nutrition and physical education, but also math, science, history, language, music and art." She believes that children will eat fruits and vegetables if they plant them, watch them grown, and harvest them. By the end of the season, children who previously would never touch vegetables were eating the ones that they had watched grow. And, by the time a student begins 7th grade, the sign hanging in the cafeteria declaring, "FROM THE KCS GARDEN," means something.

In 2007 Julie Holbrook was hired as cafeteria manager at KCS. The *Lake Placid News* writes, "By June of that year [2007], she [Julie] was using butter instead of margarine, shell eggs instead of processed eggs, and fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables instead of canned fruits and vegetables. By September 2007, she was using tomatoes, greens, peas, squash and kale from the school gardens for meals. By June 2008, staffers were making most of the school's food from scratch. A year later they were making all the bread products from scratch, including pizza dough. By September 2010, all beef was being bought from local farms, there was no flavored milk and the school became a CSA member of Essex Farm." More waste can be composted from whole foods, and this improved compost is then brought over to the garden, which Julie expanded her first summer on the job.



The mission in Julie's cafeteria is for children to get most of the nutrition that they need in the day at school so that their parents have one less thing to worry about at home. She explains that if you give children the chance, they will appreciate good food. She writes, "The very best is when students start making the connection between how they feel physically, emotionally and energy wise by the

food they are eating:" they start to realize that they deserve good food. Many families even send their kids to Keene for the quality of the cafeteria.

All students K-12 file into the gym. Their respective tables have been set with table clothes colored by art classes and some children run from table to table looking for their hand-turkey, cornucopia or pilgrim stick figure. They finally find their seats with grumbling stomachs as parents, siblings, friends, alumni, and Neighborhood House members pay and file in. Some pull up chairs next to their relatives while others make their way to the community tables that have been set for visitors. Thanksgiving dinner is a tradition. Volunteers from the high school serve the Neighborhood House members and people file through the line that for today is student served. Everyone waits not so patiently for the ice cream cups to be handed out after seconds and thirds have been guzzled. Finally, the meal ends and the students lead the community in their all too natural composting routine. Before the meal the elementary school students wearing paper-crafted Pilgrim and Indian hats chant bashfully, "we are thankful for the food we eat, the love we share, and the friends we meet."

