

A new learning opportunity for Monroe Demonstration Academy students is growing from the pandemic. Literally. When Monroe and other TPS sites were in distance learning to start the 2020-2021 school year, Principal Rob Kaiser and the north Tulsa middle school's science department huddled up to figure out ways to safely provide hands-on educational experiences for students. Those discussions eventually led to the addition of outdoor gardening beds on campus through partnerships with Food on the Move and the Ed Darby Foundation. To date, almost 400 pounds of produce have come from the school's outdoor gardens. "We built the garden as a first step," Kaiser said. "The kids get to go out, learn about growing, how do we cultivate plants and the science behind it. Through that process, we kept partnering with Food on the Move, who brought the idea to the school to have it as a class." Bolstered by growing student interest in the gardens, Monroe Demonstration Academy has expanded its agribusiness program to include aquaponics this school year. Aquaponics is a combination of hydroponics, or growing plants without soil, and aquaculture, which is raising freshwater animals, such as fish, snails or shrimp. In an aquaponics system, plants are fed the animals' waste and in return, those plants clean the water that the animals live in. By relying on recirculated water, an aquaponics garden uses less water than its soil-based equivalent. In addition to incorporating material from science classes, the project also provides students with the opportunity to learn about entrepreneurship and public speaking, as Monroe's agribusiness students get to develop the marketing, packaging and branding to sell their produce later this school year. The students will also get to decide how the proceeds from those sales will be spent. "One thing we want to consistently do at Monroe is building experiential learning opportunities for kids," Kaiser said. "This was built from that. This is a chance to create new opportunities for them to show success and engage with material that they hadn't before with the hydroponics and urban farming." Kevin Harper is the executive director of Food on the Move, a Tulsa-based nonprofit that works to address food insecurity through multiple avenues,

including supporting community gardens and hosting block party-style events that double as distribution events for fresh produce and other resources. The organization has even handed out some of the produce grown by Monroe students at recent giveaway events. “We had microgreens and tomatoes that the students grew,” Harper said. “We were able to tell people that came through the line that that produce was grown by the kids. It was so exciting to tell them that the microgreens were from the kids.” In addition to helping secure the aquaponics equipment, Food on the Move volunteers partnered with the Oklahoma State University Extension office to provide cooking classes for Monroe students. Along with exposure to fresh unfamiliar produce, the students got to make their own Takis, salsa and pickles. Harper said Food on the Move is interested in doing something similar with more north Tulsa schools in the future. Additionally, plans are underway to expand Monroe’s agribusiness program to include hydroponics next year. “This is such a community effort,” Kaiser said. “We’re trying to bring parents, partners and community members to the table to help us grow programming for our students. Between them, the Opportunity Project and all these different groups wanting to provide new opportunities for students at Monroe Demonstration Academy is really special.” Video: Tulsa Tech’s inaugural firefighter academy class. Get local news delivered to your inbox! Subscribe to our Daily Headlines newsletter. Sign up! * I understand and agree that registration on or use of this site constitutes agreement to its user agreement and privacy policy.