Little Roadrunners Preschool students Liliana Buralla (left) and Leighana Puerta perform a quick pat down on the soil during the garden kick-off event on Wednesday at Little Roadrunners Preschool in El Centro.

PHOTO VINCENT OSUNA

EL CENTRO — Students at Little Roadrunners Preschool here may not completely understand their ABCs just yet, but they will now be studying the life cycle of a seed by way of their own personal garden.
The preschool held a kick-off event Wednesday morning to unveil the garden in front of parents and guardians.

The garden — one half made up of vegetables, the other of flowers — takes up about a fourth of the preschool's campus, which is tucked away on Park Avenue inside the much larger Lincoln Elementary School.

Little Roadrunners is one of Imperial County Office of Education's 14 state preschools in the Valley, ICOE director of Early Care and Education programs Michael Castillo said.

Twenty-four students, ages 3 to 5 years old, attend the preschool's morning session, while 24 others attend its afternoon session. All of them will get to enjoy all the garden has to offer.

The garden came into fruition thanks to a partnership between UC Cooperative Extension CalFresh Healthy Living Program and ICOE's Early Care and Education programs.

The partnership has existed for the past 10 years, and currently has gardens at 11 of ICOE's early care sites (seven federal head starts, four state preschools).
Throughout this month, UCCE and ICOE will host kick-off events at each of those sites.

“Our programs are very fortunate to have these partnerships that provide these activities,” Castillo said.

Paul Tabarez, UCCE Imperial County community education supervisor, noted that, although it has existed for the past 10 years, the partnership has only truly flourished within recent years.

Three years ago, Tabarez recalled that only two sites in the Valley had gardens.

“As the partnership grew with ICOE, we've expanded to 11 gardens now,” he said. “So more kids are getting to experience the gardening and nutrition.”

Tabarez said he believed that, compared to other sites, Little Roadrunners' draws in the most participation and support from parents, students and staff for its garden.

Wednesday's turnout supported Tabarez's belief. Roadrunners had the option of transplanting broccoli or celery seedlings or planting carrot or cilantro seeds — all of which were provided by UCCE.

All the vegetables were planted inside one of four large containers filled with soil.

Just across from the boxes were about six prepped areas so that students could dig up and plant potted flowers.
Little Roadrunners Preschool student Acacia Garcia digs up a small hole to plant a flower during the garden kick-off event on Wednesday at Little Roadrunners Preschool in El Centro. PHOTO VINCENT OSUNA

While the preschool’s site supervisor Elisa Mendez and UCCE staff provided some instruction, all of the planting on Wednesday was done by students with their parents.

“This is also to demonstrate to the parents the importance of interacting and doing outdoor activities with the children,” Mendez said. “I’ve noticed the parents bring it to their homes, too, and encourage their children to participate in activities at home.”

Before the kick-off, UCCE provided a free curriculum on gardening and nutrition education to the preschool, which students will continue to study throughout the school year.

Tabarez explained that the garden is the perfect tie-in to the curriculum.

“Mainly I want them to know where their food comes from,” he said. “We live in an agricultural community and I feel like there’s a lot of students that don’t realize where their food is coming from.”
The students will continue to monitor and care for the garden, and, come harvest time, will get to see and taste the fruits of their labor.

“Hopefully it helps solidify in their mind, like, ‘OK, that’s broccoli,’” Tabarez said. “And hopefully it just helps them identify vegetables so they can consume them in future, or at least try them.”

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