

Student Peer Leadership Skills Develop While Creating Sustainable Gardens

SUMMARY

Mark Twain Elementary School (MTE), nestled in the idyllic Central Sierra foothills of Calaveras County, is home to 493 K-8th grade students. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, CalFresh Healthy Living, UCCE (CFHL, UCCE) in-person programming at this elementary school did not occur for over a year and a half. As of Federal Fiscal Year 2022 (FFY 22), MTE students and teachers were once again ready to begin “harvesting” leadership skills and engaging in nutrition education.

In Spring 2022, MTE teachers reached out to CFHL, UCCE to provide garden reinvigoration support. As a result of providing technical assistance in MTE schools garden, CFHL, UCCE launched a garden-based peer mentoring program in an effort to create a sustainable garden program. In this program, on a weekly basis, 7th grade peer educators taught the Learn Grow Eat Go curriculum to K-2nd grade students in the school garden. This year, six student peer mentors were trained and taught three groups of K-2nd grade students.

BACKGROUND

During the 2021-2022 school year, a school garden champion emerged along with an ELAC (English Learner Advisory Committee), who were both instrumental in creating a garden-based peer mentoring program.

The garden champion initiated a leadership club for 7th and 8th grade students with a goal to improve the overall health of their school. In this club, there was a unanimous vote to start a garden reinvigoration project.

To begin this project, the leadership club reached out to CFHL, UCCE to help facilitate and advise these efforts, as well as, the ELAC members to support this project.

SOLUTION

In April 2022, CFHL, UCCE met with the leadership club to understand how to best support the garden reinvigoration project and ensure the project continued as a student-led effort.

It was identified that support from the school leaders, community groups, and students would ensure sustainability and regular maintenance.

In addition, the leadership club began a fundraiser to create a garden mural and build a greenhouse this school year.



Picture is of teen directing students to pick a Sugar Snap Pea from the garden



For more information or to get involved, contact Carmela Padilla Program Supervisor for the University of California Cooperative Extension CalFresh Healthy Living, UCCE program in the Central Sierra at cmpadilla@ucanr.edu



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OUTCOME

By the end of the 2021-2022 school year, there were six peer mentors in 7th and 8th grade trained by CFHL, UCCE as extenders of the LGEG curriculum. These six peer mentors taught three groups (62 students total) in K-2nd grade on a weekly basis. In addition to mentoring, these students were able to grow a Spring Garden which rallied interest of garden classes and projects from other grade levels. Students also led efforts to create a new school mural that encouraged healthy eating and gardening.

Feedback from the students on the teaching end and the receiving end were both positive. Future plans include training more peer mentors for garden education, offering more classes the opportunity to participate in the garden program, bringing the food grown in the garden to the cafeteria for Harvest of the Month tastings, and sourcing community donations to support the youths ideas in creating a healthier campus environment.

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