

Cooking and gardening at Helen Street

Current activities

Cooking Background

In 2006 a group of parents, with grade 3/4 children prepared and cooked a meal to share. The children selected the menu, and working in groups of 5-6 prepared a recipe. The day was a great success and following on from this we proposed a similar exercise, once a term for the following year.

Thus far in 2007 we have had 2 cooking days - these have been well supported by parents and staff and enjoyed enthusiastically by children - see attached report with survey feedback.

Funding

Last years meal was paid for by the Healthy eating grant with an additional \$2 contribution from each child. We ran one session in Term 1 with a \$2 donation. For the remaining three sessions, we hoped to get a \$10 payment. This was not entirely successful, but more than enough money was collected to fund the activities and teachers have class lists of monies paid. The last lunch for example cost \$135 - which fed approximately 60 children, 12 parents and with some remaining for staff. A lump sum contribution would streamline organisation and remove the need to return to parents during the year for money. It would also reduce the burden on classroom teachers, collecting and marking off the money.

Organisation

The menu is selected and shopped for by parents. The multipurpose room is set up with trestle tables and equipment for preparation, and chairs for eating. Groups of 5-6 children, with a volunteer parent prepare a dish - and generally hand it over to be put through the oven, or cooked on stovetop. An alternative would be that each group cooks the whole meal for their table to share - this may be difficult with current resources but with a different menu planning principles and extra equipment, would be possible. This would also provide a greater range and variety of activities for each child to participate in. Depending on the menu and stove use, one or two groups set up in the kitchen, and remaining groups in the multipurpose room. Promoting the sessions to class families could be simplified by the class email address list – which admittedly may not include everyone – and class notices going in the newsletter, removing the need for separate notices to be produced and circulated.

Schedule

9.00 - 9.30 start

9.30 - read menu, gather equipment for each dish, gather ingredients, prepare.

Aim to have preparation completed by 11.00 recess. Depending on class schedule - return to class, while parents put anything requiring cooking through the oven, some children return to help with clean up.

12.30 All return to eat, then clear tables, tidy up by 1.30 to have lunch break.

Equipment

We are very lucky to have the spaces that we do to run this programme. Some money could be usefully spent to get multiples of basic kitchen equipment, which would be useful for other kitchen centred school activities - and possibly also extend their frequency. A list could be generated and some of these things could be called for as donations - others would need to be bought new (depending on donated quality) - such as knives, saucepans, frying pans. Any equipment purchases would need to be weighed against storage issues.

Children's reflections on the program

Forty-one children from grades 3 and 4 completed a brief survey asking them to identify firstly what they liked about the cooking program and, secondly, how it might be improved if offered again.

Responses to the first question were overwhelmingly positive. All children indicated that they enjoyed the program. Most commonly, children cited making and subsequently eating the food as enjoyable aspects, for instance

I liked the taste of the potato and the soup! And I like cooking.

Being able to cook and then eat what we've just cooked.

Children also identified enjoying practicing skills such as rubbing butter into flour. Many appreciated that they were trusted to chop and dice food with knives:

I liked the cooking part where you have to chop things.

It teaches us how to cook before we're adults.

Children also appreciated social aspects of the program. They liked working cooperatively in groups and eating together at tables that they had set with knives and forks. Parental participation was also valued, especially by those whose own parents were involved:

We let parents help and the setting. Also the way people were nice to people.

I liked that we all got to be included and got to make different things in groups.

The food and the service by the parents was good.

I like it that my mum is here sometimes.

Children made a range of suggestions for improving the cooking program, although one responded 'you don't need to' and others left this section of the survey blank.

A number observed that they would like to prepare less healthy foods. Many requests were made for chocolate and sweets to be incorporated. Pizza and pasta dishes were also suggested by a few respondents:

No more veges please and more desserts.

Some of the children recommended that they have input into future menu planning, with one proposing that children might bring recipes from home. Others said they would have preferred to choose who they cooked with rather than being allocated to groups:

We could have a vote on what food we make and eat.

Let kids choose their own groups and what food they cook.

Many suggestions were made that more food be prepared, i.e. an additional course, or that cooking be offered more frequently. Some indicated that more parental support would facilitate this:

Make foods that take longer to cook so we have more fun

Make it longer and cook more food to eat and if more parents could join in that would be better.

Parent reflections on the program

Parent involvement is essential for the programme to continue; thus far we have been successful in gathering volunteer helpers.

Fifteen parents who had helped out with a cooking day this year were surveyed, and we received 9 responses. Questions were asked about program enjoyment, suggestions for improvement, preferred level of involvement and willingness to continue to participate:

All parents surveyed indicated that they enjoyed the program 'much' or 'very much' and all were happy with the level of commitment entailed in running a cooking day once each term. Several stressed the importance of parent involvement:

Need to get parents involved to make it successful
The school is as strong as we make it.

Respondents were asked to provide suggestions for improvements to the program. One included children selecting dishes to be cooked, interestingly a suggestion also made by some of the children. It was also suggested by a parent that children serve their table, rather than current practice of parents serving, or helping themselves from platters. There were two suggestions involving students not in grades 3&4 – one that Grade 6 students be involved as leaders/organisers and another that cooking should be offered to other year levels; 'it would be great if all our kids at the school were able to have a go at making something'.

A few parents commented on the time taken to tidy up afterwards and dwindling support at this stage. As one put it 'we need more hands on deck at clean up time'. Cleaning up is an important part of the program. We can involve children more in this side of things, and possibly have an extra one or two people to aid this part of the process. Another parent raised a concern that extra sessions would mean extra cost for families.

All parents surveyed indicated they were prepared to continue their involvement with the cooking program.

Staff involvement

Staff have been very supportive of this venture, and this is greatly appreciated. We aim for these sessions to be as little as possible extra work for teachers

Kitchen Garden Foundation grant.

<http://www.kitchengardenfoundation.org.au>

There have been questions from parents regarding Helen Street applying for this grant. Our school has a space limitation that would make meeting 2 of the selection criteria difficult.

Two key requirements are spaces for a cooking room a vegetable garden. The cooking room needs to accommodate 5 or so workstations - stoves, sinks, storage and preparation area, etc. and eating space. The vegetable garden needs to be able to substantially support the cooking programme. It would need a major project - such as the block being developed to make application for this grant a possibility.

A further requirement is that after the initial support for cooking and gardening staff, the school be able to support them - the grant is for \$62,000 - \$50,000 of which is the staff component. \$12,500 is to go towards equipment purchase.

Perhaps this is a topic for wider discussion?

We can however provide the essence of this programme to children at Helen Street. Representation could usefully be made to the Kitchen Garden Foundation, that a scaled down version of the grant be developed and made available for schools with space/ resource issues to apply for.

Other funding opportunities

Proposal to approach a charitable organisation – see Appendix 1

Telstra community grants

Darebin Community Grants

Proposal to Kitchen Garden Foundation

Recommendations

- That the cooking programme continue to be offered to grade 3&4 students
- Children should be involved to a greater extent in recipe selection and in cleaning up.
- Funding - to be funded from school budget - either through an additional stipend for grade 3/4 children, or funded directly. In addition actively seek alternative funding sources for equipment purchase, submission to fete money disbursement.
- Scheduling - in so far as possible to have days organised at beginning of year/term - this would allow parents who work part time to possibly jiggle their days to be able to participate. A cooking day should be held for each class once each term
- Equipment - purchase a basic range of kitchen equipment to facilitate food preparation.
- That other funding opportunities for cooking and kitchen gardening be investigated by the school

Sarah MacLean and Jane Miller

September 2007

Gardening

Background

A gardening group was established in 2005, and some interested parents have worked with children to plant some areas and carry out some maintenance work such as sweeping. The Group – enlarged has also formed the basis of the clean up for the fete. Generally the Gardening Group meets for an hour per week – 2.30-3.30 on Thursdays. 6 or so children, depending on the number of parents available leave their classroom activities to participate.

Funding

Through grants received, and Council support we have 2 compost bins and paper recycle bins. The vegetable garden was constructed and planted with Darebin Community Grant. A Mitre10 Landcare grant provided funds to plant the front garden, some equipment and a worm farm. Money has also been allocated from the Science budget, and the Buildings and Grounds Programme budget.

Issues

Water

The drought and resultant water restrictions have had an impact on the range of activities and frequency of the group meeting. First term was too hot – we didn't meet if the temperature was to be over 30 degrees, second term we met almost weekly, as planting and tidying activities were carried out. The two prep classes with Lisa and Nikki planted the vegetable garden and things are growing there well.

Watering is problematic. Water restrictions mean that we can only water Wednesdays and Sundays until 9.30 am. The garden outside LA12 could be watered with runoff collected in small buckets under each tap in the drinking trough outside the classroom. This class planted some bulbs which have been flowering and brightened up that corner. The peach tree has been fed, some acanthus planted closer to the wall, and plants removed from the drip line of the peach tree, to maximise the benefit of any rainfall/watering. Similarly, the drinking fountain on the west facing wall could water the camellia bed under the stairs. The garden bed along the walkway has had the mirror plant removed, some compost dug into

the soil, and some planting done, with more planned. Fortunately there is a tap there for easy watering on our watering days.

Activities such as seed raising for the vegetable garden are dependent on reliable watering, both up to point of planting and afterwards. As rainfall has dwindled, the tank is essential for activities here to continue (assuming it rains enough to fill the tank!)

The tank near the vegetable garden will be installed in the September school holidays, and we are awaiting the outcome of the Community Water Grant application – if successful that means another tank.

Over the summer holidays for the last 2 years we have had a band of parents to water. We aim always, with the exception of the vegetable garden to plant dry garden plants – but most still need some water.

The issue is ongoing watering outside this time. If the school community decides that spending effort on the planted spaces in the grounds is worthwhile, we will need to develop strategies to support the garden as rainfall dwindles.

Sustainability of activities

A system was set up to collect suitable rubbish to be recycled in worm farms and compost bins, however this has dropped off, and a neighbour from Herbert street is supplying the compost bins with their kitchen waste, and I bring some from home to keep the worms fed. These issues were discussed at the last Building and Grounds meeting (September) and steps are being taken to restart the programme. Parent involvement is essential for gardening days to continue. The departure of a supportive parent has had an impact; also there are seasonal peaks and troughs.

Sustainability of planting

We have discovered that any planting that is done needs to be fenced off as the trample factor is significant. The improved front garden area – compared to last years planting shows this. A fence has been built around the bed along the walkway to protect new plantings. The vegetable garden could be partially screened off – so it can still be a thoroughfare – especially from the western end to reduce the effects of the wind.

Where to next?

In some ways expansion of the vegetable garden is necessary for its survival – to provide a greater degree of engagement for the children and a greater drawcard for volunteer parents.

With water independent from mains supply, more vegetable garden beds can be built. This would provide more tasks for the children. Opportunities for integration of garden based activities into classroom activities – subjects such as science, maths, art, would also be enhanced. The understanding of the synergy between growing and cooking would be expanded by a greater variety of crops and herbs. There are also aesthetic benefits of a growing corner of the school yard.

Jane Miller,
September 2007

Appendix 1 - Gardening proposal (idea for a possible submission to a charitable organisation)

Cultivating Community has provided support to Thornbury (Hutton Street) Primary school to establish their edible garden.

www.cultivatingcommunity.org.au

Northcote Primary (NPS) is a small school in the inner-North of Melbourne. We are seeking support to employ a part-time project officer over one year. This person would work with parents and staff at NPS to enhance existing programs.

As a small school NPS does not currently have the resources to meet selection criteria for the Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden Project. For instance we have only two garden plots. We have, however, operated a small parent run pilot cooking program for the grade 3s and 4s. A part-time project officer would work with Kitchen Garden Committee (comprising parents and staff) to undertake the following tasks:

- 1 coordinate parents, volunteers and children to extend the garden beds at the school
- 2 work with children to establish a seasonal planting plan, including soil care, crop rotation, maintenance and water wise gardening practices
- 3 liaise with teachers to incorporate cooking and garden/plant based activities into classroom curriculum
- 4 plan menus for classroom cooking, set up kitchen and coordinate parent volunteers

Cooking involves applied learning and assists students to critical independent living skills. Well documented benefits of cooking programs in schools include assisting numeracy and literacy when children, group and team work. We have found that cooking programs are an effective way of engaging students who find it hard to engage in traditional learning activities. Kitchen and cooking programs are also an effective way to generate community participation. We would also work with parents from non-English speaking backgrounds to include local cooking knowledge and enable children to learn about a range of cuisines.

This funding would complement grants we have previously been awarded to upgrade our garden and facilities. The school has been awarded a Darebin Community Grant from the Council to build garden beds, fill them with soil and do some planting. A Mitre 10 co-contribution grant enabled us to set up a worm farm and some garden tools. The Council donated compost bins and paper recycle bins.