Service-Learning Fresh Food Mission

Pilot Grant Summary for “Project Inspire”

Trenton Special School District

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Challenge: The service-learning mission is designed to offer real world experiences for the students who want to solve problems in their own communities. This challenge engages youth voice, meaningful service, reflection and other standards of quality service-learning practice.

Background Information: Students at Trenton Rosenwald Middle School brainstormed to find a problem that needed to be solved within their community. Trenton is fortunate to have received a 21st CCLC After-School Grant that provides a quality after-school program that meets throughout the school year and in the summer as needed. “Project Inspire” has become well-known in our community for providing students with academic enrichment learning opportunities that shape our students from Kindergarten until Graduation. As part of a program at TRMS, students are allowed to choose from numerous enrichment activities. “Cooking Class” has become our number one most requested class. Therefore, we chose to use this class to implement our service-learning project. Students in this class understand the importance of healthy eating and healthy habits. They have studied the benefits of fresh produce and have also been a part of initiatives in our school system that have been provided from farm-to-table programs. We are fortunate to own several items already that helped with the start up of our service learning project. The teacher facilitated our project and told the students to consider our resources and problems that we have in our area. Coming from a Title 1 school, many of our students verified that they do not have access to fresh foods at home and do not have the financial resources to obtain and cook healthy meals. They were challenged to find a way that they could contribute to a solution and to find ways to learn more about this issue. Students were provided with the opportunity to use Learning Blade as a resource for their project and completed the mission available on Fresh Foods.

Investigation: A survey was introduced in our programs that allows students to look at areas in their community that needed attention. These items are chosen from brainstorming with students during after-school sessions. Topics included: gardening, farming, livestock, and hydroponics. During our investigative period, students were asked to pick from a variety of fresh foods that were available in our area to determine if they had ever eaten them. Students were asked about their knowledge of the growth of plants, preparation for eating them, and their likes and dislikes in regards to taste. We found that they had little knowledge of herbs and what the effect of adding these to a meal could mean for taste.

Solution: While working through the service-learning challenge and fresh food mission, students chose as their service-learning project to find a way to provide fresh and tasty foods to their friends and family who didn’t always get to eat healthy meals due to the financial aspects and the availability in their homes and the community. Students also wanted to be able to learn about the process of producing these items in order to continue this project throughout the following school year and provide healthy food items to residents of the local nursing home.

Action Plan: Students would use the Learning Blade Fresh Food mission while working on their project. In addition, they would use hydroponic equipment to learn about growing food that would be used in their cooking classes and shared by their peers. They would use growing lights to facilitate the growing of seeds into plants that would be used in their cooking classes and also planted in a raised bed garden behind the school. These items would eventually be given to participants to take home for their family to cook and eat. Future plans include giving some produce to the local nursing home.

Learning Blade: Students at TRMS (grades 5-8) completed 530 activities using tools on Learning Blade, and they spent over 49 hours accomplishing these tasks. 54 students completed the Fresh Foods Mission with guidance from the instructor. 85 students participated in the project. Learning Blade was an effective and efficient solution to teaching the students about a variety of aspects of producing fresh foods and their importance. The students particularly enjoyed activities about careers focused around these areas. We are fortunate to have a Master Gardener that has joined our teaching staff. She is able to provide students with even more details and give them real-world scenarios for the use and importance of fresh foods.

Outcomes: Students were enrolled in Stem/Cooking classes were able to complete missions on Learning Blade (Fresh Foods Mission) and use the information while working with the instructor to use Hydroponic equipment and Indoor Grow Shelves/Lights to produce small batches of herbs and spices and to plant seeds that will be transplanted to our raised bed garden that is being finalized behind the school. During their “Cooking Class”, students have learned about the growing process of the foods they eat, healthy eating habits, and the process of cooking these foods. They also explore new recipes in the kitchen throughout the service and plan to make a cookbook of their recipes using items that they have learned to grow and harvest. Students used items produced in gardens such as basil, cilantro, thyme, and oregano to enhance the taste of meals they produce in the class and to eat a variety of new fresh foods that they had never tasted before. Students shared in a meal they produce in the cooking class and were able to share these items with their peers and bring home to family members. The plants under growing lights are being transplanted to our small garden (raised beds) to harvest. Future plans include growing items in the fall and spring that will allow them to take these items to the local nursing home.

Reflection: Students reflected before, during, and after the project. The slow growth of some plants tested their patience at times. The thrill of growing items inside the school was exciting to these students. They found that they could enhance the taste of food by using items they raised themselves. They now understand the importance of fresh foods in a healthy diet. They want to plant different types of plants as the school year progresses and to increase the supply of these items. We will be purchasing other hydroponic growing equipment to increase the supply. They are also going to work on composting food from the cafeteria. They have found a new understanding of how plants are rooted to transplant to larger gardens. The most effective part of the action taken during this project was that they were able to share their cooked meals with friends and that they were allowed to experiment with different seasonings. The students have learned to work as a team to produce a meal from seed to the stovetop. As an instructor and administrator, we found that students were amazed at the variety of foods that they are able to make in cooking class and took pride in the fact that these items could be grown at school. Future plans are to expand their garden and add more equipment in order for them to share with even more people in the community. They also want to make a cookbook, and we plan on them sharing their findings at a school board meeting during this school year. We will also promote their activities on social media.

Pictures of a variety of equipment and activities are shown below.

A box with a green box

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Description automatically generated A plastic container with green containers

Description automatically generated A shelf with seedlings on it

Description automatically generated A tray of soil in a container

Description automatically generated A tray with soil in it

Description automatically generated A shelf with trays of seedlings

Description automatically generated A room with a window and plants on shelves

Description automatically generated A plant in a glass jar

Description automatically generated A group of people standing in a room

Description automatically generated A group of people with long black braids

Description automatically generated A person in a kitchen

Description automatically generated A child and child cooking in a kitchen

Description automatically generated A person cutting vegetables on a tray

Description automatically generated A salad in a bowl on a table

Description automatically generated A group of people standing in a line

Description automatically generated A child washing dishes in a kitchen

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