

Plant a Thousand Gardens Collaborative Nutrition Initiative, Miami



THE ENTRY POINT

The Education Fund – Miami–Dade County’s local education fund – and its partners are implementing an action research–based project with a collaborative, interdisciplinary, seed-to-table garden approach that focuses on improved eating habits and academic success.

THE CHALLENGE

How can The Education Fund, in collaboration with local universities, nonprofit organizations, and elementary schools, build the capacity of educators to develop and implement a set of strategies and practices that improve classroom learning and change the eating habits of school-aged children and their parents for a lifetime?

THE PARTNERS

The Education Fund

Barry University

Health Foundation of South Florida

Miami–Dade County Public Schools

- participating elementary schools
- Department of Food and Nutrition
- Department of Science Curriculum

Slow Food Miami

The Story

In 2004, Slow Food Miami began working with several Miami schools to plant gardens and engage students in the food-production process, with the goal of altering nutritional habits among students. They modeled their program after Alice Waters’s well-known Edible Schoolyard program in California. The program’s success led Slow Food Miami to approach The Education Fund to adopt the project for widespread dissemination – with the ultimate aim of changing public policy. Given its solid understanding of the school system, demonstrated capacity to work with teachers and students, and previous success in taking systems to scale, The Education Fund was well positioned to undertake this initiative.

In 2007, the Health Foundation of South Florida, a not-for-profit funder dedicated to the health and well-being of underserved individuals in South Florida, awarded The Education Fund a \$200,000 grant to launch the Plant a Thousand Gardens Collaborative Nutrition Initiative (CNI). In partnership with Miami–Dade County Public Schools (M–DCPS) and Slow

Food Miami, The Education Fund is currently in its first year of piloting this innovative nutrition initiative in five of Miami-Dade's elementary schools. As Linda Lecht, president of The Education Fund, says, "This is called Plant a Thousand Gardens because the goal is really to change the landscape forever."

The long-term goal of CNI is to stem the harmful health effects of the childhood obesity epidemic, which disproportionately affects low-income communities of color. M-DCPS, the fourth-largest system in the nation, has the second-highest percentage of minority students: 60 percent Hispanic, 28 percent African American, and 3 percent other non-White minorities – a total of more than 90 percent minority students.

Eating patterns and preferences develop early in a child's life and set the stage for long-term health prospects; therefore, the project is directed at enhancing the nutritional literacy of elementary school students districtwide. In addition, CNI works specifically in schools located in low-income communities, where the program has an opportunity to make the greatest impact. It serves second-graders, where the program is not competing with the emphasis on testing that is characteristic of the third, fourth, and fifth grades, and where the science curriculum aligns with the project, focusing on the lifecycle of plants.

In each of the five pilot schools, two second-grade classes (a total of 220 students) plant vegetable and herb gardens. In addition to learning about botany through hands-on work in the garden, students grapple in their classes with nutritional literacy, healthy eating habits, and culinary skills. Equally important, teachers integrate lessons from the garden into the math, science, language arts, and arts curriculums. The project also serves as a venue for community gardeners and health advocates to actively participate with educators and students in the learning process.

Parents play a key role in the food choices their children make; thus, parent participation is critical in effectively changing the nutritional habits of children. The Education Fund trains participating teachers to engage parents by involving them in their child's nutrition-related homework, with the hopes of educating the whole family about healthy eating. In addition, each school hosts workshops for parents, which include presentations from chefs, gardeners, and health-care professionals. Peter Uttal of the M-DCPS science curriculum department explains the importance of engaging parents: "We want to train kids, teachers, and parents to advocate for better nutritional choices. But in the end, it's the parents who buy the food" (*Miami Herald*, "Knowing and Growing," January 1, 2008).

Teachers are at the heart of CNI. They not only engage in project work (which includes being responsible for the garden as well as integrating lessons from the garden into the classroom), they also play a key role in documenting student experiences, impressions, and learning. In partnership with Barry University and under the guidance of Professor Jill Farrell, teachers are trained to simultaneously play the role of teacher and researcher. Each month, teachers meet to analyze collected data and share findings.

This action research helps assess how well the garden initiative meets the school's learning expectations. For instance, teachers collect and examine data to determine if test scores in reading, health, science, and math are increasing and if the eating habits of their students are changing. The action research is not only an evaluation tool, but also empowers teachers to create a voice for policy recommendations and to advocate for districtwide program replication.

Strengths, Challenges, and Scaling Up

Strengths

CNI's main strength lies in its partnerships. The Education Fund, along with the Health Foundation of South Florida and M-DCPS, have harnessed shared points of interest, gaining the funding and participation necessary to roll out this innovative program. CNI has created an advisory committee to strategize about further integrating the work and identify and attract additional partners. Less formally, coverage in the media has spurred interest among groups of young professionals in becoming involved. Most recently, a local university approached Education Fund president Lecht about sending a team of medical residents to assess the health and wellness of students.

Another strength of the program is the commitment of parents, community members, and school staff. In addition to learning along with their children, parents are asked by CNI for their feedback about the program. Local farmers and gardeners visit the schools and provide knowledge and expertise to students and teachers. Within schools, the project has bridged a gap between academic and support staff. For example, the cafeteria staff work to meet the changing nutritional demands of students and the custodial staff help to plant and harvest vegetables in the garden. The project has spurred learning both within and outside of the school.

Challenges

While teachers, parents, and students report positive experiences with the program, one challenge for CNI is how to fully measure their success. Although the project is conducting an independent evaluation gauging changes in eating habits, to assess CNI's long-range goal of improving physical health would require program participants to be followed longitudinally in order to fully assess program success. Also, evaluation instruments need to be developed for the program that will allow educators to determine the program's academic-achievement impact. Finally, the program may want to have more of the action research focus on academic achievements in addition to nutritional behavior changes.

Although CNI is an education program, discussion among the partners suggests that the initiative might also have to take on an advocacy role, pushing for changes in policies affecting school-food programs and nutrition standards, especially at the federal level. So, a second challenge is determining the skills, capacities, and partnerships the initiative needs in order to effectively build and mobilize a constituency for healthy foods in the district and the state.

A third challenge is the heavy time demands on teachers to participate in a program that is early in its developmental process. Currently, teachers must figure out how to integrate the garden program curriculum in daily lesson plans, develop and complete action research projects, and attend weekend workshops. While CNI will always be a challenging project for participating teachers, The Education Fund is exploring ways to alleviate some of their workload.

Scaling Up

During this piloting phase of CNI, The Education Fund is overseeing its implementation and expansion. The Education Fund hopes to triple the number of participating schools in the upcoming school year. Its stated intention to “exponentially expand the work over the next year” raises the question of capacity – especially budgetary – to oversee this initial expansion. Ultimately, The Education Fund hopes to turn the program over to the district for implementation across all Miami-Dade schools.

What would CNI at scale look like? The Education Fund’s goal is to have a CNI model in every school in Florida, which would make a school garden as commonplace as a school library. Parents currently involved in the program would like to see it expanded to include middle and high school grades, so that lessons about nutritional literacy from elementary school are reinforced and further developed throughout the child’s development.

Discussion Questions

- How do we change the educational model so that disparate stakeholders and departments (language arts, science, health, nutrition, etc.) begin to engage from a “whole child” perspective and truly integrate their work?
- What are measures of program success in the short and long term? How can CNI create sustainable and lasting changes so that new eating habits have long-term impacts?
- How do we empower teaching professionals and begin to tap into their knowledge and expertise? How do we create a truly open dialogue and give in-the-trench professionals a seat at the decision-making table?
- How can teachers manage the demands of action research, developing a new curriculum, engaging students, reaching out to parents, and more all at once? How can teachers be engaged in action research without compromising classroom teaching and school responsibilities?
- How can teachers fully engage parents in the work? If CNI expands, what strategies can be used to engage parents of middle and high school students? How would these differ from the strategies used to engage the parents of elementary school-aged children?
- How can CNI reach all schools across Miami-Dade (and all of Florida), and how can it be replicated in other school districts across the United States? What are the barriers to replication in other cities (e.g., climate, land availability)?

Site Team Members

Linda Lecht is president of The Education Fund, a nonprofit local education fund that designs and implements innovative initiatives that involve the private sector in improving public schools in Miami–Dade County, the fourth-largest school district in the nation.

Jo Anne Bander is co-leader of the Slow Food Miami Convivium and helped transition its Plant a Thousand Gardens project into what is now the Collaborative Nutrition Initiative. She is a consultant and writer with over forty years of experience in the private, nonprofit, philanthropic, and government sectors and currently oversees From the Source, a consulting firm focused on strategic philanthropy, sustainable agriculture, and artisanal foods.

Penny Parham is administrative director of the Department of Food and Nutrition for Miami–Dade County Public Schools. During her tenure, she has made significant contributions, including establishing a universal free breakfast program in 2003, improving the nutritional quality of products sold in vending machines, and implementing a summer training program to provide professional development for food-service employees.

Jill Beloff Farrell is an associate professor at Barry University, where she serves as chair of the Curriculum and Instruction Department in the Adrian Dominican School of Education. She has directed numerous action research studies and professional development portfolio projects and regularly presents findings with her students at annual conferences.

For More Information

- The Education Fund: <www.educationfund.org>
- Health Foundation of South Florida: <www.hfsf.org>
- Miami–Dade County Public Schools: <www2.dadeschools.net>
- Slow Food Miami: <www.slowfoodmiami.com>