

## Foreword

Gardens in schools. Children in gardens. Doesn't this make sense to almost everyone, urban dweller or country cousin, red state conservative or blue state liberal, African American or Latino or Caucasian parents? And yet, if you drive by most schools, what do you see? Expanses of lawn or asphalt, faceless buildings with little hint of students out in the landscape. Once in a while there might be some ornamental shrubs, a bed of daffodils, perhaps a bean teepee. Thankfully, mercifully for students and teachers, this is changing. From Boston to Washington, DC, to Fort Worth to San Francisco, and in lots of city and rural schools in between, school gardening is making a comeback, reclaiming some of that asphalt, helping to build strong bodies (and minds). It's great to have Jane Hirschi's book articulate the ways garden-based learning makes sense. To paraphrase Herbert Hoover (and France's Henry IV before him), Jane makes it clear why we need a garden in every school, and students in each of those gardens.

Ironically, where there seems to be the greatest need, garden-based learning has the fewest institutional footholds to help it survive. *Ripe for Change* shows how change is starting to happen. Jane looks at what it takes for schools, districts, and cities around the country to build real bridges between the garden in the schoolyard and what children experience inside the school.

I've always found inspiration from this statement by American philosopher and psychologist William James: "I am done with great things and big things, great institutions and big success, and I am for those tiny, invisible, molecular moral forces that work from individual to individual, creeping through the crannies of the world like so many rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, yet which, if you give them time, will rend the hardest monuments of man's pride."

Let's imagine, all across the country, a legion of tiny, invisible, molecular moral forces creeping through the crannies of the school world. I see teachers, parents, and community members removing chunks of asphalt and then enriching the soil with humus from the school compost pile. I see principals and superintendents pitching in on the weekend to build raised-bed flower gardens for each side of the walkway leading up to the front door. I see sixth graders teaching first graders how to poke a hole in the soil with their pointer finger, plunk a pea into the hole, then cover it with moist soil and wish it well: "I hope you grow, little seed, and feed me peas by the end of the school year." I see school cafeteria cooks running taste tests at lunchtime to introduce third graders to three varieties of beets. I see fourth graders running experiments in their science class to see what proportion of humus and sand makes the best growing matrix for carrots. All this capillary oozing of moral forces can rend the current monument of pride—our unhealthy focus on schools as test score factories.

For too long now, the paradigm has been school as factory, or more recently, school as office. Instead, in the spirit of John Dewey we need to imagine schools as laboratories for democracy, as experimental greenhouses where we figure out the best ways to grow both children and vegetables. Mind you, it's important to grasp that school gardens lead the way to higher test scores and greater student achievement. Jane makes this eminently clear through a survey of all the recent research on garden-based learning. But she also makes it clear that we need to aspire to a "broader definition of success than simply academic outcomes." Time spent in gardens increases students' sense of well-being, improves their attitudes toward the environment, increases their interpersonal skills, expands what they're willing to eat, and provides improved learning for English Language Learners. Gardens can raise test scores *and* make children more active and productive citizens. Now that's a goal worth aspiring to.

It's instructive to realize that garden-based learning is not a new thing; it once flourished in American schools. So what we're actually seeing now is a return to the garden, not some new-fangled educational whimsy. As part of the Nature Study movement at the end of the nine-

teenth and beginning of the twentieth century, school gardens were heralded as a progressive education innovation that helped “grow a better crop of boys and girls.” Innovative schools in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia planted gardens and the idea spread across the country to Cleveland, Dayton, St. Louis, Minneapolis, and throughout California.<sup>1</sup> By 1910 the USDA estimated there were seventy-five thousand school gardens in the country, and two organizations—the School Garden Association of America and the International Children’s School Farm League—focused expressly on spreading the school garden movement. Listen to H. D. Hemenway, director of the Hartford School of Horticulture and author of *How to Make School Gardens*, expound the virtues of garden learning: “The school garden creates a love of industry, a love for the country, for nature and things beautiful, and makes boys and girls stronger, more intelligent, truer men and women.”<sup>2</sup> Jane’s articulation of the benefits of school gardens today is remarkably resonant with the claims being made a century ago! (Though I think she should add “truer men and women” to her list of benefits.)

And so, one wonders, what happened? *Where have all the flowers gone, long time passing?* Where have all those school gardens gone, long time ago? They’ve gone to the graveyards of mass-market textbooks, No Child Left Behind, standardized testing, mandated time on task, an impoverished view of the big purposes that schools can serve. Even before the educational malaise of the last three decades, schools had become walled off from the nearby natural world. In his provocatively titled article “How My Schooling Taught Me Contempt for the Earth,” Bill Bigelow describes his elementary schooling in the 1950s in northern California. “Whether it was in the study of history, writing, science, arithmetic, reading or art, the school erected a Berlin Wall between academics and the rest of our lives . . . The hills above the school were a virtual wilderness of grasslands and trees, but in six years, I can’t recall a single ‘field trip’ to the wide-open spaces right on our doorstep.”<sup>3</sup> And I suspect this means that they didn’t venture outside into the nonexistent school garden either.

Education, in the last half of the twentieth century, went through a substantial indoor-ification process. The school was Berlin Walled off

from the school grounds, gardens, and the nearby community. And the curriculum became less tangible, less hands-on, more abstract. The healthy rebirth of progressivism, of integrated and child-centered curriculum in the 1960s and 1970s, was bulldozed under, starting with the false claims of the *A Nation at Risk* report in 1983. Since then, it's been a downhill trudge into the mire of NCLB and punitive, test-score-driven education policy. *When will we ever learn, when will we ever learn?*

Garden-based education is part of the relearning process and part of the larger movement toward place-based education. Place-based education is about reconnecting schools and communities, classrooms and schoolyards, children and the nearby woods, meadows, and gardens. Reconnecting students with their nearby real worlds makes education more tangible and graspable, which leads to more motivated students. More motivated students are more academically successful. It's a simple formula. Furthermore, in our article "Bring It on Home" in *Educational Leadership*, Greg Smith and I explained that "an education that consists only of the abstract and faraway won't sustain the interest of the young. All young people need to feel that what they are doing makes a difference and contributes to the welfare of others. And all of them need to believe that they can make change. Place- and community-based education provides the perfect context for this work."<sup>4</sup>

The school garden, a nearby "safe but wild place," is one of the best contexts for this work. No field trip permission slips required, no expensive bus rentals, fewer concerns about bathroom facilities. Just down the hall, to the right, and out the door into the schoolyard gardens, where there are weeding and mulching tasks to accomplish, math problems to solve, bugs to identify, a raft of writing prompts, and a vivid experience of making a difference. As Jane clearly articulates, the greater emphasis on contextualized and problem-based learning in the Common Core State Standards aligns beautifully with the garden-based learning opportunities. Higher test scores and truer men and women—what's not to like?

Or, if you have simpler aspirations, the school garden can help here as well. For a number of years, the East Wing at the Westminster Center School in Westminster, Vermont, had a well-entrenched organic-snacks-

from-the-garden program. Over the years of growing and putting by dill pickles, dilly beans, grape jelly, tomatoes, carrots, and potatoes, the children honed their math skills, developed critical thinking, deepened their reading and writing abilities, and became more deeply connected with community members.<sup>5</sup> One unanticipated result was that children's tastes changed. A friend of mine, whose daughter was a student there, reported that after a garden-based meal, his daughter came home raving about the delicious vegetables. "Hey, can't we have more Brussels sprouts in our garden? They're so delicious!" Just think: kids who like Brussels sprouts. Garden-based education can make a difference!

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