

CPGC SUPPORTS CHICAGO PARK SCHOOL GARDEN PROGRAM

As announced at our September General Meeting, the Chicago Park Garden Club Donations Committee voted to donate \$500 to the new Garden Program at our own little Chicago Park School. I first heard about this program from Principal Katie Kohler when I visited the school back in 2023: the plan was to turn a two-acre field into a big educational garden for the grades K-to-8 students. I wondered at her vision of multiple fields of flowers, vegetables and other plants. The field looked unpromising, scrawny, weedy and dry. So Lois Koenig, Gloria Clayton and I decided to visit the school in person and deliver their check to them. And we were very glad that we did! That field has been transformed!



The sight that met our eyes as we descended the stairs to the field was like a mini-farm. Multiple garden areas were interspersed with support structures: a greenhouse, work areas, a tool shed, and a gigantic chicken coop. We saw the reason for the size of the structure when the entire class of kindergartners filed into the coop. Of course: it had to be big enough for people as well as chickens!

As we arrived, the children were spreading out through the gardens. Mrs. Kohler introduced us to Lauren Valentino, the garden educator, who explained that the children were on a “scavenger hunt” for the different parts of the plant, which they had just learned, and taught to remember with a little song. It went something like: “Flowers and seeds, roots and leaves...” The kids were excited as they filled their little fruit baskets with various plant parts, to be shared with the instructor in their outdoor class time.

As Ms. Valentino worked with the kids (assisted by two parent volunteers – this is a high-involvement school!), Principal Kohler proudly showed us around. A beautiful long row of cabbages was marked “Row 19” to help identify what’s growing there. We also saw chard, and other fall/winter vegetables. All of the plants are started with seeds (some sprouted in their greenhouse) and planted in the ground by the children. Nearby, a garden shed held their tools: multiple rakes, shovels, etc. all very neatly and carefully put away, ready for their next use. Another shed, Mrs. Kohler explained, will be used as a store, from which the students can sell their produce to members of the community.

Ms. Valentino explained that each activity is keyed to the specific age-group, with the goal of teaching about the life-cycle of plants, their uses, their place in the ecosystem, and the importance of building community. The result, she said, is “a rich learning environment that is filled with objects that inspire wonder and imagination.” For example, she led us to a bin filled with soil. The younger students love to get their hands dirty mixing the soil – in the process learning about the need for each component of the soil such as compost, perlite, and minerals. Each grade gets a 30-minute lesson twice a week. We could see the excitement of the children, as the kindergartners filed into the chicken coop to feed the plant parts they’d collected earlier to “their” chickens (all hens, to prevent any roosterly dustups!). And later, as a fourth-grade group came in, their energy was high as they talked about what areas of their farm they were most looking forward to working in.

Ms. Valentino’s salary is partially paid by Sierra Harvest, a local nonprofit that has similar programs both in schools and among individual families, helping to create and maintain gardens while educating the new “farmers” on the skills involved. Lauren concentrates all her efforts on the Chicago Park school; she lives nearby, and has a child attending the school. Activities also include things like guest chef and farmer visits to the classroom, and harvest-of-the-month tastings. But Sierra Harvest does not provide a fund for day to day school garden purchases or needs. That’s where we come in!

The school’s funding for these items comes from the community. The school holds autumn garden cart sales and a spring plant sale, netting about \$400 per year. The fund is typically spent down over the course of the school year. So our \$500 will really make a big difference here! Other members of the community, both individuals and businesses, make in-kind contributions to the project, ranging from the labor to build the chicken coop to tools, seeds and irrigation equipment. We feel that we are joining a very important effort in our community: teaching tomorrow’s farmers and gardeners about the love, joy and fulfillment of growing things.