

Carver Public Schools

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Carver Fifth Graders Bring Fresh Food to Their Kitchen Tables Following Hydroponic Lettuce Harvest



*Carver Elementary School Fifth graders Alexis Dowding and Jackson Witkowski with the lettuce they plucked from the hydroponic lettuce harvest on Thursday, April 6.
(Photo courtesy Carver Public Schools)*

CARVER — Superintendent Scott Knief and Director of Food & Nutritional Services Theresa Vernazzaro are pleased to announce that Carver Elementary School fifth graders learned about the importance of fresh farming and sustainability via a science lesson that brought hydroponic lettuce crops to their kitchen tables.

On Thursday, April 6, approximately 98 fifth-grade students at the Carver Elementary School harvested their own lettuce for the first time from the school's Fork Farms indoor hydroponic units.

The hydroponic system grows plants using water, nutrients, and a growing medium instead of the traditional soil method. Director Vernazzaro invested in 8 hydroponic growth systems from Fork Farms to support the district's Food and Nutrition Services program. Within roughly a year and a half, the Food Services program will see a return on its investment with the supplemental vegetables and herbs to be grown in the units.

With the introduction of these indoor hydroponic systems, Vernazzaro teamed up with fifth-grade science classes at Carver Elementary School and the Environmental and Agricultural Science Pathway classes at the Middle High School for the inaugural crop and harvest providing a real-world, hands-on educational experience.

All fifth-grade students harvested lettuce as part of a "farm-to-table" gardening program that was built into the fifth-grade science curriculum. Over the past 30 days, students completed the growth cycle by constructing the growing system, planting the seeds, and monitoring the plants' pH levels and essential nutrient levels.

Along the way, the students learned about what hydroponics is, how it differs from traditional plant growing systems and where plants get their food from hydroponic systems. Students also learned about the importance of sustainability and how to limit their carbon footprint as these systems feature a controlled agricultural environment that uses less water, energy and space than traditional agriculture.

"My goal by partnering our hydroponic lettuce harvest lesson with our fifth-grade science classes was to start empowering our students at an early age to make lifelong healthy and environmentally-sustainable choices," said Director Vernazzaro. "By

harvesting their own food, our students also learned that the quality of these plants is far superior to those purchased in their local supermarket as these crops were not as susceptible to contamination as those grown in the fields are and will not be affected by weather or transportation woes."

During the harvest, students were guided by their classroom teachers and Director Vernazzaro on how to properly remove their lettuce heads. At the end of the day, each student took home a head of the lettuce they grew.

"It (the hydroponic system) looked easy to put together and was cool to watch. I never knew it existed before," fifth-grade student Jackson Witkowski said.

Added fifth-grader Alexis Dowding, "My mom is a gardener and I like to help her sometimes. There were a lot of different pieces, but it was something different and new to try."

Both Witkowski and Dowding said that they would use the lettuce they harvested for either tacos or fajitas.

The school's hydroponic system can grow roughly 144 vegetables or 288 herbs. Lettuce was chosen as the first crop, but the school plans to grow other produce, such as tomatoes, strawberries and possibly pumpkins, as the students get more comfortable experimenting with the units.

Similar to what the elementary school is doing, Carver Middle High School's Principles of Ecology students also harvested hydroponic lettuce on Monday, April 10. The Principles of Ecology class is an introductory class for the school's Environmental Agricultural Science (EAS) Pathway.

Carver's elementary students that are growing hydroponic lettuce will have the opportunity to join the EAS Pathway, a high school progression that includes both technical and advanced courses that prepare students for a career and college.

Students in Carver's EAS Pathway will also have the ability to use the district's newly built greenhouse, which was funded in part through DESE's Innovation Pathways grant, as part of their Principles of Ecology, Horticulture, Sustainable Agriculture, and AP Environmental Science curriculum.

"Our EAS Pathway capitalizes on the place-based opportunities that our students have growing up in cranberry country by bringing them back to their roots via the understanding of the current and future sciences of gardening, farming, and pulling on the unique environmental aspects of the region," Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning Dr. Meredith Erickson said. "The result of these experiences will allow students unique opportunities to co-construct their education, give back to the school and community, and develop skills that will serve them beyond graduation."

Through the EAS Pathway, the food that is grown in the greenhouse and hydroponic units will help supply the district's award-winning Culinary program with ingredients in addition to supporting the school's Food Services program.

"We understand that students learn best when they are given real-world projects that provide them with the opportunity to develop their skills, and harvesting their own crops allowed them to do exactly that," Superintendent Knief said. "By giving our students this experience early on, we are fostering knowledge and skills that are needed to make healthy and informed decisions that can be applied throughout their time in Carver and beyond."

Director Vernazzaro has been invited to the 2023 Northeast Farm to Institute Summit jointly with Fork Farms to highlight Carver Public Schools' grow systems.

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Carver Public Schools has 8 Fork Farms indoor hydroponic units, two of which are housed at the elementary school. (Photo courtesy Carver Public Schools)



A fifth-grade student at the Carver Elementary School harvesting their head of lettuce on April 6. (Photo courtesy Carver Public Schools)



Director Vernazzaro helps a fifth-grade student at the Carver Elementary School harvest their head of lettuce. (Photo courtesy Carver Public Schools)



Director Vernazzaro helps another fifth-grade student at the Carver Elementary School harvest their head of lettuce. (Photo courtesy Carver Public Schools)

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