

BEST PRACTICES FOR FOOD AND GARDEN YOUTH EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS: FINDINGS FROM A D.C. COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS

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Acknowledgements

I think that it is common knowledge that educators are not nearly respected to the degree that they deserve to be in our country. Working in schools is more difficult than ever with the covid-19 pandemic and nationwide staffing shortages, so it's incredibly essential that we acknowledge the hard work of educators in our country. Through this community needs assessment process I got to personally observe the hard work and passion of many different educators and individuals who work around schools, and want to state that I was incredibly inspired by your work. Thank you to the teachers, school staff, Kid Power instructors and staff, and staff from other organizations that I got to chat with, for everything that you do.

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Introduction

Our food systems define so many aspects of our lives. What we grow, cook, and eat represent our cultures, sense of selves, and our livelihoods. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that every person grows up with a meaningful understanding of their own culture of food. Equal access to food and garden youth education programs is essential to ensuring that every child grows up with the skills and knowledge that will enable them to have positive relationships with eating, cooking, and gardening. It is important to evaluate food and garden youth education programs as a crucial part of the learning development process for children.

This report is the result of a community needs assessment (CNA) process completed for Kid Power, Inc. in order to evaluate its VeggieTime program. The CNA report helped to evaluate its responsiveness to school communities and to make future recommendations for the program. While a specific CNA report was developed, this report is a generalizable version of what was learned. The suggested practices for food and garden youth education programs came out of the various research work, interviews, and discussions throughout this assessment process.

This report will describe six best practices for implementing food and garden youth education programs in ways that are impactful, have a solid long-term infrastructure, are culturally responsive, and work to uplift and support the local community. These practices are based on changes to the administration of food and garden youth education programs, rather than concepts for curriculums of programs. These six best practices are 1) to work to become institutionalized into the community that the organization serves; 2) to guarantee that all work around food and garden youth education programs is inherently collaborative; 3) to ensure that staff positions are long-term, desirable, and well-supported; 4) to ensure that staff positions are accessible and attractive to people with lived experience in the communities that the organization serves; 5) to create consistent programs that follow an understood schedule; and 6) to provide a variety of touchstones of access for community members to engage with programs. Following these best practices can help non-profit and community organizations create stronger programs.

Background of Research

The community needs assessment of Kid Power's VeggieTime program took place between September 2021 and January 2022. The CNA primarily took the form of a variety of methods to receive feedback and information on how school stakeholders viewed VeggieTime, and what they saw as the most important parts of food and garden youth education programs. Additionally, direct observation of VeggieTime in-school and after-school programs helped give more context about what the actual programs entailed. Research into data about food and garden youth education programs was used to supplement these direct findings. Lastly, interviews with a variety of other DC-based food and garden youth education organizations, anti-hunger organizations, and research organizations helped to give more context about how other organizations around DC worked to perform these programs.

Kid Power, Inc.¹ is a 501c3 non-profit that works to establish no-cost daytime, afterschool, and summer programming at six Title 1 public elementary and middle schools in Washington, D.C. These programs are meant to facilitate meaningful investment and learning in key developmental areas. Kid Power's mission statement is the following:

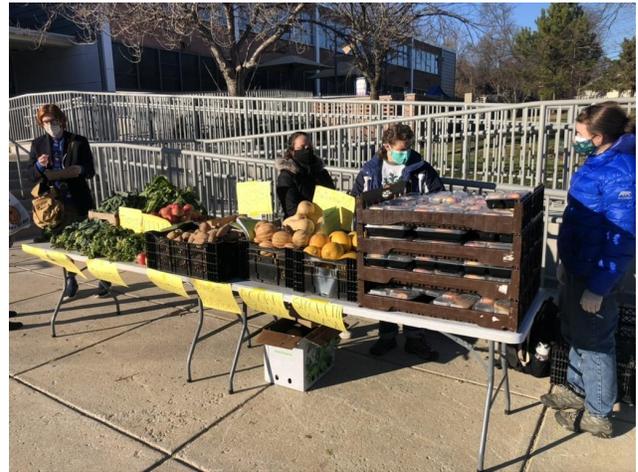
Kid Power, Inc. inspires youth leadership by promoting academic advancement, physical and emotional wellness, and positive civic engagement in underserved communities throughout the District of Columbia.

VeggieTime is a program within Kid Power, Inc. for food and garden youth education programs. These are primarily performed through its partnership with the FoodCorps program, where they place a FoodCorps Service Member at participating schools to teach day-time lessons in partnership with teachers' classes, take care of the school gardens, perform cafeteria events, teach after-school Kid

¹ Kid Power, Inc. <https://www.kidpowerdc.org>

Power lessons, and complete other activities that add to a school-wide culture of health. Kid Power describes its VeggieTime program as:

A sustainable agriculture, nutrition, and environmental science curriculum that incorporates hands-on gardening, cooking, and market operations. Kid Power builds or adds to existing school gardens to create outdoor learning spaces for students, providing access to healthy foods and getting kids excited about taking charge of their own health.



The community needs assessment consisted of the following types of research:

- Observation

VeggieTime and Kid Power programming were observed across the different Kid Power-affiliated schools to work towards familiarity with the programs of the organization, and see firsthand how these programs were run.

- Focus Groups

Two VeggieTime Schools Community Dialogues were held to ask a series of questions for family members and school staff members from Kid Power-affiliated schools about their experiences with VeggieTime, and what they wanted to see out of their school's garden and the related educational programs. The community dialogues were performed using a focus group model, and participants were compensated \$20 each. The dialogues were held virtually on Google Meets, and across different time periods to account for differing schedules. A guide to using

Google Meets was sent to those who requested one, to account for potential differences in knowledge about technology. 9 family members and school staff members from Kid Power-affiliated schools attended the two dialogues.

- Survey

A survey for family members at Kid Power-affiliated schools was conducted to ask questions about family members' knowledge of VeggieTime programming and evaluate their priorities for its programs. This survey was distributed through Kid Power's email list serve for family members and was also performed in-person during VeggieTime Produce Pop-ups. Participants received a \$5 gift card for filling out the survey, and were entered into a raffle for one of three \$15 gift cards. There were 8 responses in total from family members.

- Informational Interviews with Kid Power Staff

Staff of Kid Power, Inc. were interviewed about their experiences with VeggieTime and about their thoughts for the future of the program. Former staff members were also contacted to gain context about the history of the VeggieTime program and Kid Power itself. Interview questions took different forms depending on the role of the individual staff member. 14 current and past Kid Power, Inc. staff members were interviewed in total.

- Informational interviews with Other D.C. Organizations

Staffers from other organizations based in Washington D.C. were contacted for interviews. The organizations that were contacted were other food and garden youth education organizations, direct anti-hunger organizations, and organizations that research food, poverty, and hunger. These interviews helped to provide more context about the state of food and garden youth education programs, ideas for best practices for these programs, and advice for how to conduct a community needs assessment. 23 informational interviews were conducted in total.

The other D.C. organizations contacted consisted of the following:

- [FoodCorps](#) (1 staff member and 6 service members)
- [DC Greens](#) (2 staff members)
- [City Blossoms](#) (3 staff members)
- [FRESHFARM FoodPrints](#) (3 staff members)
- [DC Central Kitchen](#) (1 staff member)
- [Martha's Table](#) (1 staff member)
- [Washington Youth Garden](#) (3 staff members)
- [Common Good City Farm](#) (1 staff member)
- [The Latin American Youth Center](#) (1 staff member)
- [The Office of the State Superintendent's DCPS School Garden Program](#) (2 staff members)
- [Towson University](#) (1 researcher)
- [The Urban Institute](#) (3 staff members)



Purpose of Food and Garden Youth Education Programs

Goals

In order to examine how best to establish food and garden youth education programs, it is essential to evaluate the purpose of these programs. Many of the goals of these programs align across differing organizations, but others are unique to specific groups. Kid Power's VeggieTime program (2021) has the following goals:

- 1) Promote positive relationships with food and the environment through a hands-on culinary and garden-based approach to nutrition and environmental science education.
- 2) Increase food access for students experiencing food insecurity.
- 3) Promote a culturally inclusive attitude towards food, reflecting the diverse backgrounds and knowledge of Kid Power students and communities.
- 4) Recognize barriers to participation in nutrition education and tailor approaches based on this lens.
- 5) Frame food choices with positivity and balanced eating – not framing foods as 'good' or 'bad'/'healthy' or 'unhealthy'.

The Pilot Light Food Education Standards² were created by a team of experts, community members, and teachers to provide a list of national standards for food and garden youth education programs to follow. Many organizations work to incorporate these national standards into their curriculum, including FRESHFARM. The standards encapsulate the following as concepts to prioritize teaching about:

- 1) Food connects us to each other.
- 2) Foods have sources and origins.
- 3) Food and the environment are interconnected.
- 4) Food behaviors are influenced by external and internal factors.
- 5) Food impacts health.
- 6) We can make positive and informed food choices.
- 7) We can advocate for food choices and changes that impact ourselves, our communities, and our world.

² Pilot Light. (2018). *Pilot Light Food Education Standards*.

The school staff members and family members who participated in the VeggieTime Schools Community Dialogues for the community needs assessment also had several goals for what they wanted to see out of VeggieTime. They listed the following as priorities for the educational programs:

- For the lessons to expose their students to more foods, especially fruits and vegetables from cultures external to their own and that they wouldn't typically eat at home.
- For the lessons to teach gardening and cooking skills that the students will be able to use throughout their lives.
- For students to feel a tangible connection to the growing process of food, and feel connected to nature and the food production system.
- For the programs to provide teachers with lessons, resources, and support for utilizing school gardens for classes.
- For the ability to collaborate and participate in programs and their school gardens.

Family members at Kid Power-affiliated schools were surveyed on which topics they thought were most important to include in VeggieTime lessons. The results for that question are below.

Topic	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Very Important
Hunger and Poverty	100%	0%	0%
Cooking	87.5%	12.5%	0%
Gardening	87.5%	12.5%	0%
Activism	75%	25%	0%
A Racial Justice Lens towards Food Policy	87.5%	0%	12.5%
Environmentalism	62.5%	37.5%	0%
Nutrition	62.5%	37.5%	0%
Science	50%	50%	0%
Arts and Crafts	50%	50%	0%
Foods of Specific Cultures	62.5%	25%	12.5%

Benefits

A multitude of studies have shown that food and garden education programs for young people have strong long-term impacts for a variety of key factors. Firstly, these programs have very positive effects on health and nutrition throughout childhood and into adulthood. Developing adequate cooking skills by teenage years is correlated with higher rates of eating a vegetable most days and more balanced diets later in adulthood³. These skills also reduce self-perceived barriers to cooking and increase the likelihood of an individual to regularly cook for their families as an adult. These types of lessons have been shown to increase the self-efficacy of young people to pursue balanced diets⁴ and to actively recognize vegetables and want to eat them⁵.

Food and garden youth education programs also help to improve the personal lives of young people. Schools that create strong individual learning experiences in their school gardens for their students are correlated with more positive feelings for school among young people⁶. School gardens also give students a stronger sense of pride for their community, and a sense of ownership for the space created⁴. Lastly, these programs help to improve students' environmental awareness and knowledge about their own environmental space⁷. In conclusion, food and garden youth education programs are absolutely essential for the development of physical and emotional well-being of youth in our country.

³ Utter, Jennifer, Nicole Larson, Melissa N. Laska, Megan Winkler, and Dianne Neumark-Sztainer. (2018). Self-Perceived Cooking Skills in Emerging Adulthood Predict Better Dietary Behaviors and Intake 10 Years Later: A Longitudinal Study. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 50(5), 494-500.

⁴ Kipfer, Hannah J. (2018). Gaining Consensus on Implementation, Sustainability, and Benefits of School Garden Programming in Washington, D.C.. *Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports at The Research Repository at West Virginia University*.

⁵ Ratcliffe, Michelle M., Kathleen A. Merrigan, Beatrice L. Rogers, and Jeanne P. Goldberg. (2009). The Effects of School Garden Experiences on Middle School-Aged Students' Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behaviors Associated With Vegetable Consumption. *Health Promotion Practice*, 12(1), 36-43.

⁶ Waliczek, T.M., J.C. Bradley, and J.M. Zajicek. (2001). The Effect of School Gardens on Children's Interpersonal Relationships and Attitudes Toward School. *American Society for Horticultural Science*, 11(3), 466-468.

⁷ Fisher-Maltese, Carley, Dana R. Fisher, and Rashawn Ray. (2018.) Can learning in informal settings mitigate disadvantage and promote urban sustainability? *School gardens in Washington, DC. International Review of Education*, 64(828), 295-312.

Types of Programs

Three different models of service for food and garden youth education programs became apparent throughout the community needs assessment process. The first model was a School Champion Model, where a specific staff member, or a team of staff, was placed at a school to headline the school's food and garden youth education programs. The second model was a School Support Model, where an organization worked to provide resources, trainings, and materials to school staff members to support their food and garden programs, rather than directly trying to do the programs themselves. The third model was an External Program Model, where an organization did their own food and garden lessons completely separate from schools. Each model has its own benefits, and shows alternative ways to consider these programs. Some organizations also worked between multiple models.

School Champion Model

As schools are the primary focal point of education in the United States, most non-profit organizations work to incorporate food and garden education into the infrastructure of schools themselves. A prominent method for establishing a culture of food and health in schools is to have a specific staff member at a school who works on the school garden and teaches food-based lessons. This could also consist of a team of staff members working together. This School Garden Champion acts as the central figure representing the school garden program, and is the primary point of contact and reference for the practices around the garden and food education programs. These School Garden Champions, or whatever title they go by at their school, are working specifically on these projects rather than taking them on as an additional role to their typical role at their school. Some schools hire their own School Garden Champion, while others utilize partnerships with non-profit organizations to establish these roles. The primary organizations that will be discussed for this model will be FRESHFARM FoodPrints and FoodCorps.

FRESHFARM FoodPrints is a 501c3 non-profit located in Washington, D.C. that partners with 19 different schools across all 8 wards. The organization hires full-time teachers that work to provide a series of lessons related to gardening, cooking, and nutrition education. FoodCorps Service Members and assistant teachers are also brought on to the program to support these roles. FoodPrints acts as an elective for students, just like music or art, where all students attend FoodPrints classes typically once a month. Some FoodPrints teachers have their own classroom, while others use a cart to bring the lessons to other classrooms. Essentially, FoodPrints is so ingrained within the structure of their host schools that it is practically indistinguishable from the rest of the framework of the schools' daily schedules. FoodPrints teachers stay with the program long-term, and from the interviews it sounded like staff retainment was high over time.

One FoodPrints staff member shared that the program was valuable as it "provides alternative ways of engagement and success. Some adults simply forget what it's like to be a kid, so it's important to create programs based on what kids actually need." Students may find it hard to engage in the typical structure of school, so outdoor learning experiences like garden programs can help break the monotony of school and provide measures of achievement outside of grades and test scores. This is essential for engaging a wide range of students. Another staff member stated that FoodPrints focuses on elementary schools as it is the age group where students are developing their taste in food, and has the most long-term impacts on establishing a culture of food. Additionally, parents are typically the most engaged during this time period.

FoodCorps



FoodCorps is a national 501c3 non-profit organization that serves in 16 states and Washington D.C. The organization selects AmeriCorps service members who are partnered with elementary schools for 1-2 years, either directly through a school staff supervisor or through a partnering non-profit organization. Kid Power's VeggieTime program utilizes its partnership with FoodCorps to staff its programs. Due to being an AmeriCorps program, the work of the service members is framed as service rather than as a job⁸.

FoodCorps is meant to create supportive roles, adding on to the existing structures for food and garden youth education programming at their schools. However, this is often not how the program ends up working out. Many of the FoodCorps Service Members shared that they were typically the sole arbiters of their school's garden programs – one service member recalled being known as “the garden lady”, as the students knew her as the single caretaker of the garden. Rather than being a collaborative process, the service members often are only connected to their school supervisor or their non-profit that they work with, rather than a wide range of school stakeholders. The FoodCorps Service Members all expressed that it was exceedingly difficult to establish meaningful relationships due to their short service terms, as they only serve for 1-2 years in total. This also leads to them feeling like outsiders, rather than feeling like a part of their school communities.



⁸ FoodCorps. (2021b). *The Official FoodCorps Handbook, 2021-2022*.

School Support Model

Another way that organizations work to utilize existing school structures for establishing food and garden youth education programs is through helping school staff to perform these programs. Rather than working to enter a school space as an external organization, non-profit organizations may choose to provide trainings, resources, and lesson plans for teachers to teach these lessons on their own. This helps to make the school gardens self-sufficient, as they can be cared for by internal school staff rather than an external organization. This also ensures collaboration and inclusion through utilizing existing school community networks. The primary organizations that will be discussed for this model will be City Blossoms and Washington Youth Garden.

City Blossoms

City Blossoms is a 501c3 non-profit organization that has been serving the Washington D.C. community since 2009. The organization works to develop positive experiences with nature and outdoor learning for young people through school gardens, community green spaces, and other forms of engagement.



City Blossoms' School Garden Partnerships are designed to support cohorts of schools participating in a three to five year partnership with City Blossoms. Through coaching, resource-sharing, and teacher-to-teacher support, each school receives the tools it needs to maintain a sustainable and affordable garden. These spaces can be tools to support lessons on healthy eating, environmental education, science, math, language arts, and much more. They also provide opportunities for students to incorporate their artwork and elements that reflect their interests and culture. The organization provides a stipend to a school staff member for them to act as the school garden coordinator for their school, but otherwise takes a more hands-off approach. The organization mostly allows school staff to establish programming and structure for their school gardens on their own terms.

Washington Youth Garden

The Washington Youth Garden program is an initiative under the 501c3 non-profit Friends of the National Arboretum. The program just celebrated its 50th anniversary this previous year. The Washington Youth Garden has a demonstration garden located within the National Arboretum where it directly teaches food and garden education lessons in a distinct program model, but also works directly with schools through its Summer Institute for Garden-Based Training. The program works to provide a series of training and systems of direct support to a wide group of teachers, to help educate them about how to utilize school gardens for outdoor learning and how to maintain the gardens. Then, after a certain amount of training, each school 'graduates', and they are meant to be self-sufficient in how to use and support the gardens. Through these practices, Washington Youth Garden operates in a collaborative process rather than a hierarchical one. One staff member from the Washington Youth Garden described that it is essential to meet schools where they're at, rather than trying to institute programs completely by yourself. They also described that this collaborative process increases buy-in and investment to the overall programs.



Distinct Program Model

Other non-profit and community organizations operate their programs completely externally to schools. While schools are a key center for learning, there are other means of connection that organizations utilize to establish their food and garden youth education programs. Some programs employ existing networks within their organizations and their community, or act to produce their own networks. Washington Youth Garden works in this model in addition to its school support role, providing unique classes and gardening opportunities in its demonstration garden in the National Arboretum. Its programs with the demonstration garden include field trips through its SPROUT program, family garden days, and other special events. City Blossoms also has distinct programs through its Early Growers program and its Community Green Spaces program. Two additional distinct programs that were interviewed were Common Good City Farm and The Latin American Youth Center.

Common Good City Farm

Common Good City Farm is a local D.C. urban farm that is located at The Park at LeDroit in ward 1. The urban garden program grows produce that is then sold at markets for pay-what-you-can prices, and allows for the use of SNAP and WIC. Typically the farm



works as an open community space for people to spend time in, but has been more closed-off recently due to the pandemic. The organization looks to bring together the local community through a shared communal urban agriculture space.

Common Good City Farm has a specific youth garden that is designed around food and garden youth education experiences. Children are allowed to just spend time in the space as they wish, but Common Good City Farm also has its own lessons and programs for youth. Their primary program is their LEAF youth program that provides a series of gardening, cooking, science, and other types of food-based

lessons. Additionally, they also have schools do field trips to the farm, have a Youth Employment Program for high school students, and have a Little Farmers Program for toddlers. These programs are done on a smaller scale than the other programs that are focused around schools, due to a smaller available population. One of their staff members described that their recruitment for programs is typically organic and works with their other outreach strategies for their other programs. This does allow Common Good City Farm to work with a variety of youth from various different areas around D.C., rather than the students at a single school. However, it was expressed that Common Good City Farm wants to reach more youth for their programs, and it is harder to do so without existing structures to reach them.

Latin American Youth Center

Latin American Youth Center is a non-governmental organization in Washington D.C. that works to serve low-income youth from all backgrounds through a wide variety of different programs. Their food and nutrition program is a more recent addition to their overall programming. LAYC teaches classes for cooking skills and engaging with broad food justice issues in their Teen Center kitchen, and also has their own garden they've worked on over time. These lessons are for youth ranging in age from 7 to 24. LAYC also partners with two charter schools to help bring their food and nutrition lessons into other spaces.



One of their staff members described that they consider the most important goal of their program is to teach youth to care about themselves and to consider how food affects them. They also described that it's always essential to be honest with young people, and to never shy away from topics like hunger, poverty, and food justice simply because someone is young. LAYC overall has a strong emphasis on youth development, and works to ensure that young people have a variety of ways to be engaged and to feel empowered by their programming.

Conclusion

All three of the described models work best within their own communities and spaces, and each has their own measures of success and achievement. While the suggested practices described in this report are meant to be generalizable to any of these models, some may work better with some than others. Additionally, when organizations have the capacity to work between multiple types of models, this greatly adds to their ability to create effective programming through increased numbers of touchstones to reach young people. The organizations that were interviewed had differing opinions on which type of model worked best, especially in terms of how to work with schools. While none of the models are perfect, understanding the potential pitfalls of each will hopefully help organizations create the best food and garden youth education programs that they can.

Best Practices

Throughout the conversations that encapsulated this community needs assessment project, six key practices emerged for organizations looking to do food and garden youth education programs. These practices were determined based on observations of VeggieTime programming, conversations and surveys with school staff and family members, the interviews performed with D.C. food and garden youth education organizations, and external research. These six practices should hopefully help any organization best establish an outdoor learning space and related educational programs that are long-lasting, have solid supports, and work in a community-based responsible service model.

1) To work to become institutionalized into the community that the organization serves.

A common theme of the discussions for this report were about how to connect with the local communities that each organization serves. While these organizations work to create educational experiences for youth, the community members they most interact with are typically family members of youth, school staff members, and other community stakeholders working either with schools or with external youth programs. It is absolutely important for organizations to build the meaningful relationships and connections that allow them to become well-recognized and understood in their communities.

This is especially important in school communities in the Washington D.C. area, as DCPS schools have a higher than average teacher attrition rates⁹. 18-19% of teachers at DCPS schools quit each year, and this rate is above 30% in wards 5 and 8. This makes it especially hard for external programs to become well-known and recognized in each school. One FoodCorps service member that served for 2 years

⁹ Levy, Mary. (2018). Teacher and Principal Turnover in Public Schools in the District of Columbia. *District of Columbia State Board of Education*.

described that all of the meaningful connections she had made in her first year disappeared, as her closest school contacts all quit before her second year.

In order to make food and garden youth education programs sustainable and long-lasting, it is essential that organizations create development plans that prioritize methods of becoming recognizable and understood in their local communities. Lauren Newman, the Youth Entrepreneurship Cooperative Manager for City Blossoms, analyzed how urban agriculture non-profits in Washington D.C. could best work to ensure that their work meaningfully serves the desires and needs of the communities they serve¹⁰. One of her suggested practices is to *build trust* in each community, to ensure that communities feel that the work of the non-profit is serving their interests, rather than operating in a top-down perspective. Intentional effort to build trust and good-will in a community can greatly improve an organization's ability to create effective programming. An examination of D.C. school garden programs found that "the success of school garden implementation and sustainability rely heavily on the support and buy-in from all stakeholders"⁴. Some of the other practices in this report can help contribute to this goal of institutionalization into the community.



¹⁰ Newman, Lauren K. (2017). Cultivating More Sustainable Communities: A Look at How Urban Agriculture Nonprofit Organizations are Addressing Gentrification in the Nation's Capital. *Sewanee: The University of the South*.

⁴ Kipfer, Hannah J. (2018). Gaining Consensus on Implementation, Sustainability, and Benefits of School Garden Programming in Washington, D.C.. *Graduate Theses, Dissertations, and Problem Reports at The Research Repository at West Virginia University*.

2) To guarantee that all work around food and garden youth education programs is inherently collaborative.

As the work of non-profit organizations is in service to their communities, it is essential that their efforts are based in collaboration with those communities, rather than solely trying to work on their behalf. An organization that works in a means external to the interests and networks of its local community risks working within a white saviorism model, rather than a community-based responsible service model. Elpeth Suber describes what this white saviorism model looks like, and the problems that result from it¹¹.

White saviorism is yet another salient characteristic of many non-profit workplaces, as it occurs frequently when white people attempt to use their power and resources to “save” a community they believe to be struggling. White saviorism often causes a damage narrative to be forced onto the community, and it minimizes the community’s agency.

A community-based responsible service model, on the other hand, works to uplift community members and provide empowering positions for people with lived experiences in these communities to have decision-making ability in the food and garden youth education sphere. This type of model respects the agency and assets of the local community. School Support Models for completing these programs are greatly effective for ensuring that localized community leaders are the ones with decision-making ability, rather than an external organization. A School Champion Model needs more effort and care to ensure that its programs are deeply entrenched within the community, and can sometimes come close to a white saviorism service model if the School Champion is the only individual working on these programs.

¹¹Suber, Elspeth. (2021). Diversification is not Enough: Dismantling White Supremacy in the Nonprofit Sector. *Washington and Lee University – Capstone in Shepherd Poverty Program*.

Additionally, ensuring that the work towards developing a culture of food and health is collaborative also adds value to the program overall. The more people involved in this work in a community, the more institutionalized it is into said community. All programs should be larger than any single individual or organization, or else they may be fragile and easily fall apart. One staff member from City Blossoms described the importance of considering “BUBA”, or “ beamed up by aliens” – a humorous term meant to represent considering what to do if a single individual staff member suddenly stopped working for the organization, without preparation. The purpose of this idea is that programs need a support team wide enough and strong enough that they aren’t held up solely by a single individual. If a program were to completely fall apart without a specific staff member, then it may not be adequately collaborative. This also showcases a need to ensure that staff positions have the supports they need to ensure longevity, to avoid a sudden loss in staff.



3) To ensure that staff positions are long-term, desirable, and well-supported.

A consistent presence in a community has the potential to be incredibly beneficial for building trust and working towards institutionalization for organizations in their local community. The organizations that had a long-term School Garden Champion positioned at schools, such as FoodPrints, FoodCorps, and VeggieTime, strongly praised how those individuals were able to provide a face to those organizations and build sustainable relationships. This practice helps to ensure that the organizations are able to meaningfully become incorporated into the communities that they serve.

Keeping an individual in a single position for an extended period is essential to ensuring that they are well-recognized as a part of the community. However, as non-profits typically hire many part-time employees, seasonal employees, Americorps service members, or utilize volunteers, this can be exceedingly difficult for them to do. Kid Power staff discussed that they dealt with high levels of staff turnover for some positions, due to most of their instructor positions being part-time work, which reduced their ability to be well-recognized in every school they work with. The instructors who had been with Kid Power, Inc. for several years had been able to develop deep connections with the school staff, but not many instructors worked with Kid Power for that long.

Organizations that utilize FoodCorps also have this problem, as FoodCorps service members only serve for 1-2 years before a new service member takes their place. FoodCorps service members often expressed their difficulty in developing relationships and not feeling like an outsider due to these short service terms. In the VeggieTime Schools Community Dialogues, family members and school staff strongly expressed their desire for the FoodCorps Service Members affiliated with VeggieTime to serve for longer periods of time. One school staff member described that students would often ask about where the FoodCorps Service Member had gone after they had left the program, and they felt confused as to why they weren't

still at the school. In the survey performed, 87.5% of family members expressed that they thought it would be valuable for VeggieTime staff to serve for longer than 1–2 years. Washington Youth Garden previously worked with FoodCorps, but they decided to transition to a School Support Model, in part due to the short-term nature of FoodCorps.

While establishing permanent positions helps to ensure the longevity of staff members, these positions also need to be well-paid, have significant benefits, and have the support systems to help individuals do their jobs well. Positions that fail to accomplish these measures are less attractive for individuals to pursue, which can lead to increased staff turnover and a decreased ability to connect with local communities.

Alternatively, programs that worked to ensure long-term retention of staff had much higher rates of connectedness to their respective communities, and were well-recognized within them. FoodPrints staff in interviews described that FoodPrints teachers are a widely recognized and appreciated part of their schools, and are often the most popular teachers at each school. FoodPrints teachers are full-time staff that work long-term with their respective schools, and are able to cultivate really strong relationships in their school communities. FoodPrints staff also expressed that staff turnover was typically pretty low, with staff staying with the program for extended periods.



4) To ensure that staff positions are accessible and attractive to people with lived experience in the communities that the organization serves.

While making staff positions attractive is an important practice by itself, it is also essential to ensure that these positions are widely appealing to people from the local communities that organizations work within. Newman writes that an important practice for urban agriculture non-profits is to *make sure the NPO (non-profit organization) staff resembles the racial/ethnic make-up of the community*. She describes that it is essential for these organizations to adequately represent the communities that they serve, or else they will potentially be viewed as external to said communities and not fit for collaboration.

Most of the non-profit organizations that were interviewed operate in low-income communities, communities with high numbers of people of color, and/or communities with high numbers of Black people. Communities that are majorly composed of low-income people, people of color, and Black people are less likely to develop trust quickly for an external organization¹², particularly due to how many organizations have failed to live up to promises in the past. Therefore, extra effort needs to be taken in order to make clear that a school garden, urban garden, or related educational space is a safe space for people of these identities.

Due to these factors, it is important for an organization to consider what potential barriers exist within its own staffing structures that may potentially prevent people with lived experiences in the communities they are serving from participating. For example, if an organization is working in a white saviorism service model rather than a community-based responsible service model, people of color and Black people likely wouldn't want to work with that organization. Additionally, if a position doesn't pay a sufficient amount to be an attractive position, then someone in a low-income community likely wouldn't want to work with that

¹² Alesino, Alberto and Eliana La Ferrera. (2000). The Determinants of Trust. *National Bureau of Economic Research*.

organization. This can be seen with FoodCorps, which in D.C. provides a living stipend of \$26,000 for 11 months⁸, which is over \$65,000 below the median household income for Washington D.C.¹³. This likely contributes to lower levels of FoodCorps service members working in communities that represent their own lived experiences. Only 42% of FoodCorps service members serve in their general home communities¹⁴, and interviewees reported that it was rare for a FoodCorps service member to serve at the specific school they had gone to. Additionally, the demographics of FoodCorps Service Members don't match up with the demographics of the schools they serve, as 67% of service members are white even though 80% of the students that FoodCorps serve are Black people or people of color¹⁵. Staff positions need to be well paid and well supported in order to attract people with lived experience in the communities that the organization serves.

Some non-profit organizations work to actively create methods of recruitment for people with lived experience in the communities that they serve. It is essential to consider pull factors in addition to potential push factors for hiring people with lived experience. City Blossoms and Latin American Youth Center work to create specific entry-level positions that allow for youth that graduate through their programs to find work after they enter adulthood. One staff member described this as cradle-to-college engagement, ensuring that their programs provided meaningful ways for youth to see how they could continue to engage with food and garden programs into their work careers, not just in childhood. This also greatly helps these organizations ensure that they are appealing to the communities that they serve.

¹³ DC Health Matters. (2021). 2021 Demographics. <https://www.dchealthmatters.org/?module=demographicdata&controller=index&action=index&id=130951§ionId=>

¹⁴ FoodCorps. (2020). *2019-2020 Annual Report*.

¹⁵ FoodCorps. (2021a). *2020-2021 Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at FoodCorps Report*.

⁸ FoodCorps. (2021b). *The Official FoodCorps Handbook, 2021-2022*.

5) To create consistent programs that follow an understood schedule.

Consistency is a key metric for helping to establish oneself in a community. Any non-profit organization should work to create consistent, continual programs that community members will be able to learn to follow its schedule. Many organizations work to create a consistent metric for how to engage with their programs. City Blossoms' Open Times for their garden program occur 5 times a week with regular schedules. Common Good City Farm's LEAF Program is held twice a week on Thursdays and Sundays. These consistent schedules allow for community members to easily understand when they can participate in programs, and make planning easier for them.

Martha's Table, a 501c3 non-profit in Washington D.C., works to establish monthly Joyful Markets where they distribute pre-prepared bags of food to families in low-income communities. They perform these Joyful Markets at two of the schools that Kid Power, Inc. works with, and family members and school staff reported during the VeggieTime Schools Community Dialogues that they knew of these programs quite well and were strongly in support of them. Family members were able to easily recall the schedule for these Joyful Markets. Alternatively, Kid Power's VeggieTime program hosts Produce Pop-ups, a similar food distribution more focused on fresh produce and individual choice, on a more sporadic basis. While school staff had observed the Produce Pop-ups enough times that they knew a good deal about the program, most family members in the community dialogues and the survey had never heard of the Produce Pop-ups before, and wanted to know more about when they would be. While this showed that VeggieTime needed to do more outreach work, it also showed that a stronger regularity to its Produce Pop-ups would help them become more established in the school communities. Consistency with food distribution events is even more essential, as some individuals may want to be able to plan around utilizing the events as a key source of food.

6) To provide a variety of touchstones of access for community members to engage with programs.

A clear finding from the community needs assessment research was that family members and school staff wanted more ways to engage with VeggieTime programs. 87.5% of surveyed family members responded yes to the question “Do you think that school gardens need to be more accessible for parental guardians and community members who want to help out with them?”. Family members who participated in the VeggieTime Schools Community Dialogues expressed that they knew that their school had a garden, but most had never seen their school’s garden personally or done any programs within them. School staff also knew about the VeggieTime program pretty well, but had limited interaction with the program beyond when its FoodCorps service members would do lessons for their classes. School staff especially wanted to feel more connected to the garden, and have access to resources, lesson plans, and other supports that would help them utilize their school’s garden as an outdoor learning space. School staff and family members strongly supported the ideas of more consistent school garden days for school communities to help out in their school’s garden, and of establishing a school garden committee at their own schools.

While VeggieTime was typically well known among school staff and family members, these findings showed that there was a strong desire for more opportunities for interaction with the program. A City Blossoms staff member referred to how the organization worked to utilize a “pathways model” for their programs that creates a variety of entry points for young people to access their programs, across a variety of different age groups. A pathways model helps ensure that all youth can interact and engage with the food and garden experiences that best fits their own needs, and increases access to these programs. Organizations that act through multiple different types of models for food and garden youth education programs are especially successful in providing multiple opportunities for access to their programs. For example, Washington Youth Garden operates both in a

School Support Model through its trainings for teachers and school staff, and through a Distinct Program Model through its lessons and programs at its demonstration garden. This helps the organization reach both students at the schools they work with, and youth who want to come to the National Arboretum for their own programs. Additionally, while FoodPrints primarily works in a School Champion Model, the organization also works to provide many resources, curriculum, and lesson ideas online in order to provide teachers and other interested stakeholders with the means to establish their own successful outdoor learning programs. Non-profit organizations should consider how they can establish multiple touchstones of access for their programs, within their own capacity to do so.



Conclusion

This report is meant to help non-profit organizations, community organizations, and other community stakeholders consider the role of school garden and food education programs. Through following the 6 best practices, organizations can work towards ensuring that their work is being done in a community-based responsible service model that positively impacts the long-term health and well-being of young people and empowers local community members to be meaningfully involved in school gardens and urban gardens. These should also help avoid the dangers of a white saviorism service model that many non-profit organizations fall into. These practices can help make sure that any food and garden youth education programs are well institutionalized into their local communities, are strongly collaborative, and well-respected in those communities.

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