**Step 1: School and Community Involvement**

Having an actively participating school and community is critical to the life of a school garden. That is why it is very important that staff, faculty, students, parents, and community members know they play a vital role in supporting garden-based education. We also know from experience that school garden success can fluctuate because of the heavy reliance on school staff, students, and community volunteers. Having good relationships with all stakeholders that ultimately support the school garden is essential.

Since this is a school project, the first and most important relationship is with the school principal. But before you visit with him or her about your idea to start a school garden, it might be a good idea to have some clarity of purpose.

**Figure 1**

**Step 1, Activity 1: Identify the purpose and goals of your school garden**

This initial conversation will likely involve one or more “champions” in addition to you. These often include teachers, community members, and students. From this initial group, you should create a sort of “think tank” that starts to identify the purpose and goals of your school garden; keep in mind the fundamental goal of any school garden:

- Meet the educational and life skill needs of the children it serves.
- Serve as a learning environment that can be adjusted to achieve a wide variety of educational experiences.
In Las Cruces, gardens can be grown year-round to maintain a learning environment that is important to children. Identifying purpose and goals can help guide and inform other decisions such as garden location, plant selection, and coordination with the seasons. The school garden literature documents extensively the education and social and life skill benefits of school gardens. Appendix 2 provides a list of some of these resources. School gardens provide a place to teach and learn a wide range of academic subjects, including literacy, math, science, history, art, creative writing, and health and nutrition. In addition to academic subjects, gardens are an ideal place to teach important social and life skills.

“Pitching” the garden is all about explaining your gardening project and bringing the community (school, neighborhood, youth, and parents) on board. It can be very helpful to be able to clearly explain the following:

- How the garden will be used to support classroom learning
- Plans for building and maintaining the garden
- Budget and supply needs and how the community can help financially
- Benefits of gardening in the classroom:

Remember, much like the garden itself, your initial statement of purpose and goals will evolve and become clearer as your team or partners grow and you plan and develop the garden. This activity is to ensure you have the support of your school principal/administration to take the next step and activity.

**REMEMBER:** Get permission from your school principal/administrator and keep her or him appraised of the progress of each step.

**Step 1, Activity 2: Know Your Resources – The School Garden Team**

Part of having a successful garden is to know who to ask for help. Volunteers, students, staff, parents, and community members should always be sought as valuable and knowledgeable resources. Now that you have the green light from the school principal to take the next step or activity, use this opportunity to bring more partners or potential garden team members to the table, and be sure to engage more than just the usual suspects. Some of these individuals or resources may have already been identified as members of your “think tank” in Activity 1. Use this activity to create a school garden team made up of students, staff, parents, and community members as a way to pull in garden knowledge. One never knows how many hobbyists or amateur gardeners a community has until it is looked into. Knowledge is the only way to maintain garden-based education.
Administrators

Principals can approve or deny teacher training time, determine use of space, and dedicate funds. It is very important to know what he/she cares about and that the garden is something the administration want to do. They must have a desire for a garden in the schools.

Teachers

This is often where the interest or idea starts, and experience clearly suggests you must have one or more teachers who are champions for a school garden. Even if teachers do not take part in the garden, they will decide if the children will participate. It is very important that teachers find relevance in garden-based learning so they see the opportunity to incorporate it into their curriculum.

Students

A school garden must meet the needs and interests of the children it serves. Students can be a great source as gardeners; but, first and foremost, it is a learning environment that can be adjusted to achieve a variety of educational and life skill experiences (see www.myhealthyschool.com).

Garden Coordinators

Who is the identified person or small group that will deal with the day-to-day issues of a living classroom when details fall through the cracks or assignments are not clear? The garden coordinator can be a volunteer; a paid part-time person from the community, who may or may not be employed by the school; or AmeriCorps volunteers. The garden coordinator is an individual or small group with clearly defined roles or job descriptions for sustaining the garden, making sure the non-negotiable requirements are met.

Parents and Community Volunteers

Many of the tasks can be performed by anyone who is willing to devote the time, but only teachers and administrators decide if the children will use the garden. Parents and community volunteers can make it easy for others to say yes by understanding institutional priorities and helping to teach lessons that coincide. Gardens can attract attention from the community. There may be a lot of talent in the form of garden clubs, master gardeners, and potential donors of gifts and services. If none of the school staff understands the horticultural needs of the garden, knowledge will have to come from the community as well as parents or other volunteers who can support the garden coordinator and teachers.
Proper volunteer management is critical to maintaining a committed volunteer base. Appendix 3 provides some guidelines for recruiting and managing volunteers.

**Cafeteria Staff or Food Service**

A food service connection may not be necessary for sustaining the garden but can be a great way to boost food and nutrition education and garden-to-table learning. Maintaining good relationships with these services and staff should be courted as an investment in the students’ food future.

**Local Farmers**

If improved cafeteria food is part of your vision, “farm-to-school” is in your future. Local farmers provide mentorships and visits to farming operations.

**Nurses**

School nurses and health teachers will find many good curriculum connections for health, safety, nutrition, and hygiene in the garden. These health professionals also work closely with districts’ nutrition specialists to provide a variety of school and community resources to combat obesity and promote healthy nutrition.

**School and Community Gardeners in Neighboring Schools and Other Towns**

Connect to the people who have what you want, and find out how they achieved it. Make a list for your area, share resources, or form a cooperative. You can use each other as precedents to show how the schools next door are reaching their goals. Appendix 4 provides a list of schools with gardens in the Las Cruces area.

**Step 1, Activity 3: Student Engagement and Ownership**

Student enthusiasm is perhaps the school garden’s most valuable resource. Students of all ages and abilities can participate in gardening activities that connect to academic learning and social/emotional growth. School gardening programs can help students develop a wide range of skills and foster a greater connection to their environment and the natural world. It is easy to get caught up in the process of establishing the garden; and well-intended, adult led school garden efforts sometimes fail to engage the students in the process.

Student buy-in is critical to any school gardening program, and there are many ways to generate student engagement and youth voice in the planning process. Try to involve student input at numerous stages of the garden’s development.

- Ask students to share any previous gardening experiences or any experiences about being or playing outside.
• Gather ideas about what it means to be a gardener. Discuss where food comes from (you may be surprised by some of the answers!). Explore the concept of gardening as community service.

• Include students in the planning stages (if possible): create a scavenger hunt to do a site survey, write letters or a garden proposal, test soil, sketch the planned garden, research local gardening resources, create planting/watering charts, and/or order seeds.

• Read stories about gardens, look at inspiring gardening photos, ask students to talk about their home gardens/community gardens/parks, etc.

• Ask students to draw a picture or write a description of their ideal school garden. If possible, utilize these ideas to communicate to students that their opinions matter and are important.

• Establish that students are members, workers, and leaders of the school gardening community.

• Talk with students about your own experience/comfort level with gardening. Reassure students that prior knowledge is not necessary. The garden is a place to learn.

**Step 1, Activity 4: Garden Rights: Accessibility and Rules**

• **Garden Accessibility:** The garden is the property of the school; but communicate that success is limited without the teacher, student, parent, and community input and support. Each school should have a designated teacher to oversee the garden’s progress but should also enlist the help of dedicated volunteers. Interested volunteers are highly encouraged to participate but must have a background check as required by the school district. Schools must put the safety of their students first, and issues of garden accessibility must be clearly understood by all stakeholders.

• **Setting the Rules:** Create a set of rules that keep the garden environment safe and orderly. Usually these rules are self-explanatory and obvious to everyone who understands the hard work put into a garden. However, it is beneficial to have the rules posted somewhere in the garden in case of doubt. Garden rules are not laws, but they are something to keep in mind when participating in the garden.

An example of rules could include the following:

- Walk on the paths and not on the beds
- Keep tools off the paths
- Place sharp edges or points of tools face down
- Put away the tools

- Clean tools before putting them away
- Wash hands after gardening
- Wash fruit or vegetables before eating
- Ask before you pick anything