

Farm to Preschool Subcommittee – Case Study

Colusa Indian Community Council
Hand-in-Hand Learning Center
50 Wintun Road
Colusa, CA 95932

Project/program overview:

Hand-in-Hand Learning Center provides care and early education to children ages 18 months to 12 years. We reside on the Cachil DeHe Wintun Indian Reservation in Northern California. Our program offers care to the Tribal families, employees of the Tribe, and for the communities within Colusa County. We began gardening about 7 years ago in a very small area right outside of our preschool playground. Last year, as we really embraced the Let's Move! initiatives, we asked for an expansion of our garden. Our dream came true! Supported by Tribal members, community members, staff and parents, we were able to form a Garden Team and put our heads together for a strategic plan. In June of 2011 the new garden was developed. We have a much larger plot with 6 very large beds currently installed and plenty of room to expand with the water sources available for expansion, and the recycled fenced garden space ready for any future expansion. Last summer, due to the late start, we transplanted plants from the nursery; eggplant, a variety of tomatoes, squash, zucchini, and a variety of peppers, watermelon, cantaloupe, pumpkins, corn, green beans, and several herbs. We had the Colusa Country Master Gardeners assist us with our planting day and family members, mothers, siblings, grandparents as well as staff from the Colusa Indian Community Maintenance Department, showed up to assist us. We funded our garden expansion with donations from tribal members and community members, recycled products, donations from the Colusa Casino and Resort, and the use of grant funding. We gladly take seed donations, and donated materials that are often available. This helps offset costs. We love recycled lumber scraps (loose parts, tree cookies, etc. to enhance our garden).

Our Center staff met to come up with our own team approach to the garden. We planned garden planting and work days as an entire Center and included the children in the process. Families were always invited to join us. That was the beginning of our expansion and newly improved garden curricula. We planted our first Winter garden this year. We had beautiful cauliflower, broccoli, kale, Swiss chard, lettuce, Brussels sprouts and onions. We are in the process of planning a tree planting day and have our trees in the Colusa Indian Community Council's greenhouse, which the children also keep their seedlings in until we transplant them in a few weeks. We will be planting apple, cherry, apricot, peach, pear, plum, avocado, lemon, orange and other fruit trees in the next few weeks to have our own developing "mini orchard".

This last month we had a garden day where we planted all of our spring garden seeds, and also planted potatoes as well as flowers.

Other areas of focus within our Center programs:

- Find ways to provide as much fresh and local produce as possible to help reduce the use of canned and/or frozen fruits and vegetables.
- Work with local produce growers to contract with our Center for fresh produce. We work in the summer with a local grower to invoice us directly, and our food service staff person picks up the produce directly from the grower. In the summer we can get Asian pears, pears, nectarines, plums, pomegranates, and corn when our corn is gone.
- During garden harvest, we plan ahead for plentiful harvest times. Freeze and/or can items that are in abundance. We shredded zucchini and froze it, then used it in muffins. We also offered a basket of harvest produce for families. The children did cooking in the classroom and made things like salsa, for snack.
- Work with local garden experts to help you get started with a garden project. Master Gardener's, garden clubs, local cooperative extensions, 4-H clubs, local universities, etc.
- We work with Network for a Healthy California, and they help provide a Harvest of the Month extension in our classrooms, as well as a newly formed garden team who comes out once per month to do garden curricula with the classrooms directly in the garden. This is part of a SCNAC grant.
- Find a produce supplier who strives to provide local produce. We found a supplier who delivers twice a week, and has what is local for us; North State Local (NSA), we now have the produce delivered as needed and storage is less of an issue during the Fall/Winter when we tend to have less garden produce.
- Ask local farmers to provide educational opportunities for children. Set up a time to visit an orchard or farm. Have a tasting of fresh produce on-site. We work with a local orchard farmer and she allows our program to take field trips to her local fruit stand, the children take home a fresh fruit of their choice, and have tastings on-site before they choose their fruit to take home.
- Get families involved! We provide information in the community newsletter about garden planting days, what we are doing in the garden, and we also provide menu samples of the fresh produce used in Center recipes for our Open Houses and family events for families to enjoy. We also send home recipes using fresh produce; which are provided to us monthly with the Harvest of the Month activity from Network for a Healthy CA and USDA SNAP.

- Ask families to share HEALTHY recipes that are family favorites, or adapt the recipes to be more healthful. Children tend to eat what is familiar to them.
- We do use the CACFP approved recipes, but adapt them further, if needed, to use our garden produce and nutrition guidelines of our Center; low fat dairy, whole grain, low sodium, and low fat, For instance; zucchini and squash added to casseroles or sauces.
- The population we serve is largely Native American. The epidemic of obesity in American Indians is increasing rapidly and is also impacting the youth at a frightening pace. We took a pro-active approach to healthful lifestyles by introducing nutrition and physical activity at the earliest ages to help set a foundation for health. The children love the garden! They are more apt to eat the foods that they help grow, care for, and harvest. The youngest children in our programs garden. They love to eat the vegetables right out of the garden. We grow our food organically, and have it set up for the ease of care. Drip line is installed at every bed and there are faucets throughout the garden (the children also use watering cans too). Our garden is an extension of our classroom. Anything we do inside can be done in the garden. Math, science, language/literacy, social/emotional, large motor, small motor...everything happens outdoors and in the garden, when possible.
- We do not have a formal evaluation as of now. We have Center committees and updates as well as planning formally once per month as an entire team, and more often within committees. We hope to come up with a better system as we go. Our Garden Team meets less often and is made up of stakeholders; Tribal members, department heads, and Colusa Indian Community staff who help support our efforts.