

VERNON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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Vernon Agriculture Science and Technology Students Grow Fresh Produce to be Served in Rockville High Cafeteria

You've heard of 'Farm to Table.' How about 'Farm to Cafeteria Tray?'

The Vernon Public Schools are taking the “farm to table” movement to a new level. Students in Rockville High School’s Agriculture Science and Technology (ASTE) program are growing cucumbers and lettuce their classmates will enjoy in the school cafeteria.

You might call it farm to cafeteria tray.

Project Homegrown is a partnership between the Vernon Public Schools’ Food and Nutrition Department and the ASTE program, and in addition to growing fresh produce includes the composting of kitchen scraps from the cafeteria. The compost is added to the soil used to grow the fresh produce.

“I have been thinking a lot about the ASTE program and how we could work together,” said Elizabeth Fisher, Director of Food and Nutrition for the Vernon Public Schools. “I reached out to Erika Bahler, who is the director, and asked if they’d be interested in starting a collaboration and Erika said ‘absolutely.’”

The impetus was a grant program through the North Central District Health Department to encourage farm to school programs and to help cover costs, which consisted largely of vegetable seeds, bins for vegetable scraps, and other supplies.

On Wednesday (May 4, 2022) Rockville High Senior Jessica Donovan harvested the first cucumbers. Junior Troy Balsewicz made a first cutting of the lettuce he and his teachers and classmates grew.

The Vernon Public Schools, in partnership with family and community, is committed to provide a quality education, with high expectations, in a safe environment where all students become independent learners and productive contributors to society.

When the weather gets warmer, the ASTE students will also grow cherry tomatoes in a garden they have prepared. The garden club will continue to grow food through the summer and fall for the Vernon Schools nutrition program.



Rockville High School Senior Jessica Donovan displays the cucumbers she just harvested.



Junior Troy Balsewicz carries a tray of lettuce from the ASTE greenhouse.

“I can’t think of a better way to reinforce for the Rockville High School community the important contributions of the ASTE program and agriculture in general,” Vernon Schools Superintendent Dr. Joseph Macary said. “Our students will be enjoying fresh vegetables grown by their friends just a few hundred feet from where they are eating. This is great for everybody.”

Bahler said students in horticulture classes and the after school garden club are enthusiastic about providing classmates with hyper-locally sourced lunches in the cafeteria and showing off what they do at ASTE.

“They’re excited about the fact that what they are growing is going to be in their school lunch, that they’re going to find it in the school cafeteria when they get lunch each day,” Bahler said.



Rockville High Senior Jessica Donovan cuts cucumbers from a vine in the ASTE greenhouse.



Rockville High ASTE Teacher Erika Bahler shows students Jessica Donovan and Troy Balsewicz how to harvest lettuce.

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“It’s great to have fresh produce that is locally grown,” Donovan said, adding locally-grown food is easier to transport and helps reduce air pollution and greenhouse gases. “You get to see where the food you grow goes and the affect it has on your community. Other students also get to see what we’ve been doing in the ag program.”

Donovan snipped the cucumbers from their vine, which is growing in an ASTE greenhouse. Teacher Erika Bahler helped her determine which cucumbers were ready to be picked and which need some more growing time.

Bahler showed Balsewicz how to cut the lettuce, also grown in a green house, then he finished the job, placing the mixed greens in a bucket for delivery to the cafeteria.

“It’s a really nice opportunity to be able to do this,” Balsewicz said. “We’re able to provide something for the school and our fellow students get to see what the ag program is doing. Many of the people over there really don’t know what goes on over here.”

And while the Vernon Public Schools Food and Nutrition Department uses locally grown produce as much as possible, the produce grown by the ASTE students takes it a new level.

“You can’t get any fresher than next door,” Bahler said.

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