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FIRST MIDDLE SCHOOL FFA PROGRAM IN ORANGE COUNTY PUTS THE SCIENCE OF SUSTAINABILITY INTO PRACTICE

Buena Park Middle School students dream big about the future of agriculture and aren't afraid to get dirty

Buena Park, CA — "This is white sage," says Vincent, naming the various California native plants as he walks through an expansive garden stretching along the center walkway of Buena Park Middle School. He stops in front of a plant and rubs his fingers on the fragrant, silvery leaves to release their scent. "White sage is an herb that was used by the Tongva," he explains. "This is the first plant that I learned about in Ms. Andros' class."

Ms. Andros is something of a legend, having single-handedly cultivated a vibrant horticultural program from the ground up, now boasting 136 students and counting. They study plant classification, landscape design, and the science of sustainability and human impacts on the earth, and then they roll up their sleeves and cultivate every inch of the nine raised planter beds that Ms. Andros funded through the Whole Kids Foundation, from planting and harvesting to irrigation installation. Madison, who is busy tilling soil, looks proudly at the pipes: "Of course, Ms. Andros has to help us a little bit, but she likes us to do the installation ourselves."

The horticultural program has been fully aligned with the national FFA organization, and Buena Park Middle School was recently designated as a middle school FFA chapter – the first in Orange County and one of only 15 in California. The feeder high schools already have nationally recognized FFA programs, and Ms. Andros was determined to create a pathway that would lay the groundwork a few years earlier. Her goal is to model what FFA programs can look like in middle schools.

So far, she's well on her way. A composter, courtesy of the "Action for Healthy Kids" grant, will soon provide a three-bin system that allows the students to get their "browns and greens" directly from school waste: food scraps from the kitchen, sawdust from the industrial arts program, and plant debris after the winter and summer crops have been harvested. Students will also use soil



testing kits, another byproduct of the grant, to check nutrient values and create the optimal plant environment. The students discover that the composition of the soil – the balance of sand, silt, and clay, as well as the nutrients required for plant growth such as nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium -- determines what plants they can grow. "Last year, we grew a radish that was *this big*" – Madison gestures like an angler might – "but it was too big to cook with, because the big ones dry out too easily. Still, it was pretty cool!" Madison pauses and then adds, "That's why farmers have a set time to pull the crops out and put them in again."

The three pillars of this horticultural program are to manage resources, grow food, and explore careers. And the students are surprisingly conversant on the range of career opportunities that an FFA program can cultivate. Caleb, busy with a trowel and a bag of soil, considers this question. "I love horticulture and being outdoors," he says. "Ag opens a lot of opportunities. You can go into engineering, ag science, biology..." Vincent, kneeling next to him with gloves and a shovel, picks up his thought trail: "...farming, robotics, and STEM too. Horticulture deals with the technical side, and that's the part that I like."

Cameron remembers back to last August, when they harvested the summer tomatoes and peppers in three raised planter beds (they added six more planters this year) and prepped the soil for the crop of winter vegetables: collards, kale, cabbage, and broccoli. Those vegetables have since been harvested and handed out at the BPMS Farmer's Market "Grab-n-Go" to students getting on the bus after school. Now, it's time for the summer vegetables again, including chiles and eggplants, and like last year, tomatoes and peppers, which have been raised from seeds in the classroom and transplanted. The students add flowers at the end of the raised beds to increase the chance of pollinators coming in (chiles and eggplant both require pollinators), and they finish it off with lemon balm and mint.

Multiple teams of kids are moving around the planters with various tools and gloves, each focused on particular tasks like synchronized moving parts. And all the while, Ms. Andros is getting her steps in as she circulates and checks-in with the students. Her goal is now to establish a garden and a pathway to the agricultural sciences at every school in the Buena Park School District. She has also applied for another grant for 10 more raised planter beds, a social-emotional learning garden, and a full-scale greenhouse.

Knowing Ms. Andros, these plans, like her horticultural program, will be blooming in no time.





Vincent poses with his white sage.





Caleb points to the fruit of the Western Redbud.

Ms. Andros works alongside her students.

Turning the soil.