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Ponus Ridge STEAM Academy's School Garden Thrives with CT Grown for CT Kids Grant

Norwalk, Conn. (Oct. 5, 2023) - Norwalk Public Schools celebrated CT Grown for CT Kids Week alongside Norwalk Grows, Chartwells and FoodCorps on Thursday at Ponus Ridge STEAM Academy.

Ponus students led distinguished guests including CT state representatives, Norwalk Common Council members and Norwalk Board of Education members on a tour of the school's "Seeds of Sunshine Garden." Tour stops included the school garden, the pollinator-butterfly garden, and the outdoor classroom space. They could also make nature bracelets.

The Seeds of Sunshine Garden is a teacher-created project founded in 2020 by Ponus Ridge's social studies and science teacher Joseph Giandurco. The goal of the garden and the outdoor classroom is to give students the skills needed to become problem solvers through project-based learning.

"Mr. Giandurco has these grandiose ideas about bringing all these great things to Ponus," said Dr. Damon Lewis, principal of Ponus Ridge STEAM Academy. "Since 2020, we've been on this road of having our garden that morphed into this outdoor classroom which morphed into a pollinator pathway. This is a culmination of a lot of work."

Following the tour, guests joined students for lunch in the cafeteria. The menu included locally grown carrots from Cecarelli Farms. FoodCorps hosted a vote for the best carrot recipe offered - roasted with herbs or pureed with mashed potatoes.

Ponus Ridge STEAM Academy has made great strides in their commitment to Farm to School as a 2023 Grantee of the CT Grown for CT Kids Grant, funded through a bill co-sponsored by State Rep. Dominique Johnson, who was in attendance to see the results.

"I proudly advocated for this bill because I knew of the work being done at Ponus and in Norwalk Public Schools," Johnson said.

Hayley Scheir, a FoodCorps service member working at Ponus Ridge, was instrumental in preparing the grant application. She also helped to organize the student volunteers and led the program on Thursday.

Thanks to the grant, Ponus was able to purchase a new garden and cooking equipment, which are used in a program called Edible U. Edible U brings students through each step of the food system by starting seeds, growing crops, harvesting food, learning to cook, and consuming fresh and nourishing meals.

“Our partnership with our state representatives who have funded the grant for our Farm-to-School initiative has been wonderful,” Giandurco said. “The opportunity to give one more thing to attract our students to school and keep them happy and healthy in school is what we really strive to do.”

Ponus Ridge also participated in the first CT Farm to School Institute, one of only three teams in the state. The CT Farm to School Institute is a comprehensive year-long professional learning opportunity for Connecticut school teams to develop and refine their farm to school programs.

CT Grown for CT Kids Week is an annual event the first week of October and is the highlight of National Farm to School Month for Connecticut. The week aims to celebrate and support local agriculture, public education and our community’s commitment to ensuring healthy nutritious meals are accessible in schools. Each year, legislators, food service directors, farmers and students gather together through farm to school activities to promote, celebrate and consume local products.