

West Hawaii Today

Symposium showcases school garden benefits

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By Bret Yager

The hands teach the brain.

This simple but often unrecognized fact was the centerpiece of discussions in Waimea on Saturday about how the island's school gardens are helping students learn — along with providing healthy fuel for the body and brain.

"The hand is our greatest tool. You get that hand in the dirt and kids are going to start learning like crazy," said Carla Hannaford, an internationally recognized expert in cognitive development.

Hannaford, A Kealahou resident, spoke to a gathering of school administrators and educators at the seventh annual Hawaii School Learning Garden Symposium at Hawaii Preparatory Academy. She stressed the importance of turning off the television and electronic devices and engaging kids in hands-on activities. The brain is wired to learn best by doing, not by punching keypads or staring at screens, she said.

Hannaford was the keynote speaker for an event that included panel discussions on student wellness, garden tours, tips for starting and maintaining school gardens and discussions on the garden plot as a classroom. About 100 people attended the event.

Early on, it is vital that kids use their hands to explore their world, pull themselves up and crawl around, even if they fall off of things, Hannaford said. While "helicopter parents" sometimes discourage their children from exploring their environment, that is how the human brain has been wired to learn, she said. Jenny Bach, the farm-to-school coordinator at Laupahoehoe Public Charter School, gave tips for introducing vegetables into school cafeterias that have traditionally had low budgets and offered highly processed foods that are easy to prepare.



Ming Wei Koh, sustainability curriculum facilitator at Hawaii Preparatory Academy, speaks at a workshop during the Hawaii School Learning Garden Symposium, where teachers and others gathered Saturday to share information on school learning gardens.



Author, biologist and educator Carla Hannaford, gives the keynote address Saturday during the Hawaii School Learning Garden Symposium -

"It's easier to slide chicken nuggets into the oven than chop vegetables for hours," said Bach.

The school garden at Laupahoehoe was started last May, and since then has supplied vegetables to the cafeteria and the culinary program. Each month, the school heavily promotes a healthy vegetable-based lunch to students. Bach hopes to offer the meals weekly in the coming year.

The quality of school food is especially important in areas where a high number of students qualify for free meals, because those meals constitute a major portion of the child's nutrition, Bach said.

Children's brains function better when their nutrition is high and their hands are busy, making the benefit of school gardens obvious in two respects. But the benefits go further, teachers said. In a school's highly structured environment, where students expect to be told what to do and when, the garden represents a refuge in the creative and imaginative, said Ting Ortiz, a teacher at Kaumana Elementary School.

"We use the garden often to draw, paint, whatever you want, poetry, singing," Ting said. "The garden is to allow for beauty, wonder, and awe."

Ting said she has watched the safe, nurturing environment of the Kaumana Elementary garden allow a toughened student to come out of his shell. Students learn communication and teamwork. Older pupils teach younger ones, and students learn to track their findings in journals, drawings and data records.

Invasive grasses, wind and weeds, hungry turkeys and other destructive forces have made gardening a challenge at Hawaii Preparatory Academy. But Ming Wei Ko, the school's sustainability curriculum coordinator, is intent on making the case to the school board that agriculture supports student creativity, communication and curiosity, and facilitates learning in other ways. She is trying to expand the school's popular semester-long agroecology class into a year-long program and hire a farm manager. Josh Ching finds peace in the new orchard and gardens at HPA — ventures he has been involved in since their inception a couple of years ago. Ching, who graduated from HPA this year, hopes to discover his future as well among cultivated plants.

"I personally like working outside," he said. "Hands-on is how I learn. The orchard is my favorite spot. That's my way to help the world, to help Hawaii. By giving back to the aina."



Manuel Jadulang, Honokaa High and Intermediate School teacher, describes different methods of propagation taught to agriculture students during his classes

- See more at: <http://westhawaiiitoday.com/news/local-news/symposium-showcases-school-garden-benefits#sthash.KKfVwvsS.dpuf>