



Outdoor classrooms bloom all across D.C.

BY KATHY JENTZ

Special to The Examiner

It may not have been Denzel Washington leading the way, but more than 30 teachers, school administrators and other education professionals had their own training day.

Instead of looking for criminals in the mean streets of L.A., these educators searched for pipe-cleaners on the grounds of Horace Mann Elementary School — all in an effort to improve observational skills and attention to detail, and learn about outdoor classrooms.

"It was exciting to show these educators what is being done and what can be done with outdoor classrooms. The teachers integrate the gardens right into their curriculum. The gardens are used not just for natural science classes, but also for literature, art and other courses," said Ashley Lidman of the D.C. Schoolyard Greening Consortium.

According to one recent study, schools with outdoor learning projects reported a 100 percent improvement in student behavior and attendance. Further, test results went up for 77 percent of the schools surveyed with garden classrooms.

Adding green space to schoolyards is not just of benefit to the students but also to the environment and surrounding community. The plantings can host wildlife such as birds and butterflies, and they can increase the city's tree canopy thereby reducing air pollution. More green space and fewer paved areas also means absorption of storm water runoff into the ground and not our vulnerable rivers.

George Telzrow, a teacher of world geography and D.C. history at Cardozo Senior High School, says outdoor classrooms are very important.

"Urban students are cut off from the environment for much of their day on a daily basis and many have had no exposure to gardening prior to this," Telzrow explained. "Just the idea that we would be planting flowers in the ground is foreign to them.

"Having an outdoor classroom gets kids outside and once they get past their fears and preconceived ideas — they actually enjoy it."

While the garden teaches about the environment and plants, it also has side benefits.

"We have Saturday 'Garden Days' where students, who would



Photos by Drena Galarza/For The Examiner

Studies have shown that incorporating outdoor learning projects, like the one at Stoddert Elementary School (top) and the fall display (above) made by Horace Mann Elementary School students, improved students' behavior and attendance.

not normally interact at school or ever socialize, have a shared focus and goal in the garden," Telzrow said. "It really breaks down barriers."

Cardozo High's Peace Garden was established with the idea of planting a few trees in memory of Sept. 11 victims and quickly expanded to include perennial beds, benches, bulbs and others as a reflection garden — a space of peace for the entire school campus.

Outdoor classrooms can take many different forms. Children can create butterfly habitats, vegetable gardens, ponds, rain gardens and more. On an urban lot, the school could look at planting a green roof, which also acts as a building insulator and keeps down heating bills. On a forested lot, a class could create a nature trail and identify native plantings with

markers. The possibilities are almost limitless.

Funding for these schoolyard gardens most often comes from a mix of grants, rather than out of school budgets. Parents, teachers and administrators work hard to plan and apply for grants to pay for these projects. One local organization that assists in applying for these mini-grants is Garden Resources of Washington. Judy Tiger, GROW's executive director, is a tireless champion of youth gardens and other community gardening projects in Washington. You can learn more about GROW at its Web site: www.growdc.org.

For more information on inspirational D.C. schoolyard gardens around the city or even how to start one of your own at a local school, visit www.deschoolyard-greening.org.

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