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Elementary gardens take root

The gardens at Highland School and Jane Stenson School are blooming with new sights, new scents and a renewed spirit of purpose. Both gardens have benefited from the mild spring, and even more from thousands of dollars in funding from a variety of sources.

Both schools received grants and other types of donations for their gardens, including \$2,000 grants from Whole Foods, through First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move initiative.

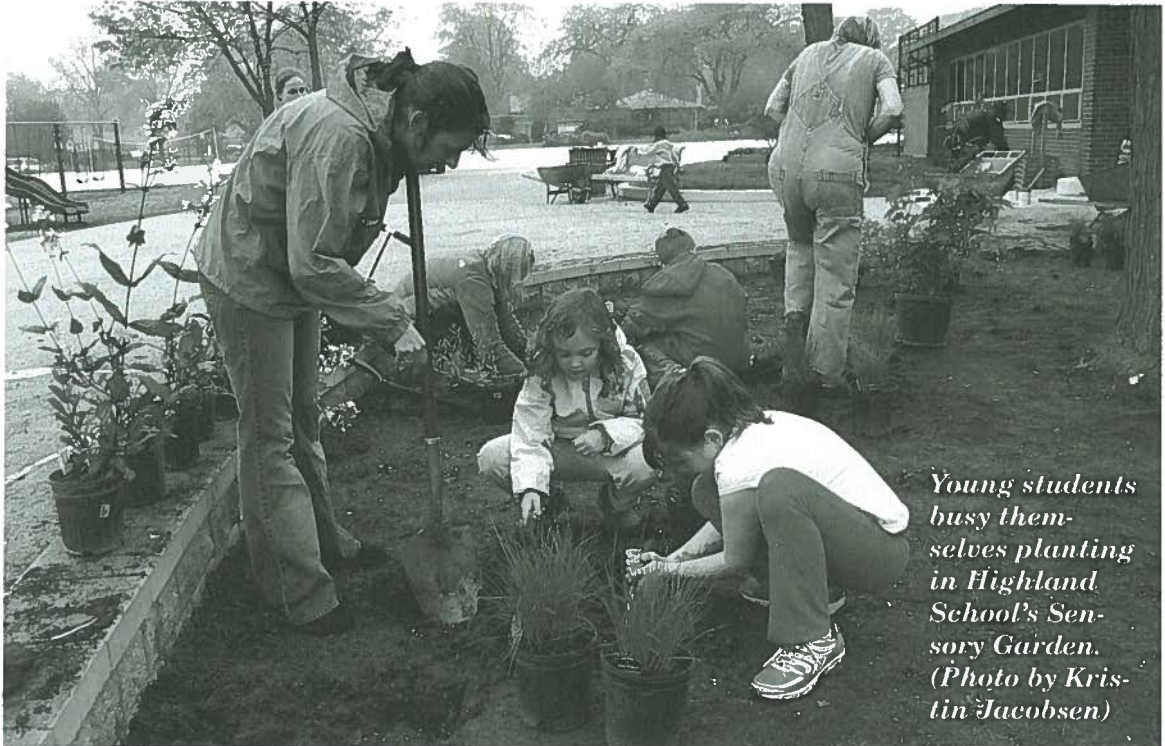
At Highland, much of that money will go to planting healthy foods in the vegetable section of the school's "Grow With Me" Sensory Garden. Two beds were planted last

year and a third was planted in June.

The idea for a sensory garden originated with kindergarten teacher Linda Hunsicker. "We had been talking about the changing demographics at the school and how some students were just not invested in being outside in nature. I realized that we had green space outside the school that was not being used to its potential," Hunsicker said.

She researched school gardens and came up with the idea of one that engages the senses. "The PTA got us off the ground with a generous contribution that let us put in raised beds, a storage shed and our initial plantings," Hunsicker said.

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Young students busy themselves planting in Highland School's Sensory Garden. (Photo by Kristin Jacobsen)

Devonshire families bond at grade-level dinners

Over the past four years, the family potluck dinners have become a popular tradition at Devonshire School. While other schools in District 68 typically hold some kind of international night, the potlucks are unique to Devonshire.

As Principal Randy Needlman explained, "In our multicultural community they provide an opportunity for families to express themselves through their cooking and to sample a variety of cuisines they are unfamiliar with. Even more, it's a nice way for families to get together and get to know each other in an informal setting."

Each grade level holds its own potluck on a different evening during the school year. The idea originated with the Devonshire PTA and the dinners are

organized by PTA room parents in collaboration with classroom teachers.

Families are asked to bring a dinner dish or dessert, and the menu typically spans the globe in its ethnic and regional variety. Needlman said, "Of course the kids always load up at the dessert table, but I try to suggest that they try something different as well." Besides the food, there are activities for the students while parents and teachers have a chance to socialize.

Even parents who have difficulty finding time for other visits to the school turn out for the dinners, so attendance is usually strong. According to Needlman, "The difference between the potlucks and an open house or curriculum night is that communication is so casual, instead

of being focused on 'how is my child doing in school?'"

"This is a way to build community, celebrate ethnic diversity and engage families with the school," said Supt. Frances McTague. "It's a way to help build bridges between families who may not have a chance to interact outside of school."

Carpenter named assistant principal at OOHJH

Andy Carpenter is taking over as assistant principal at Old Orchard Junior High effective July 1. He replaces Rob McElligott, who has accepted the principal's job at Wood Oaks Junior High in Northbrook District 27.

Carpenter has been the dean of students at Old Orchard for the past three years, and was a social worker in the school for four years before that.

"I'm very excited about this opportunity," Carpenter said. "I've gotten to know the students, staff and community well over the past seven years. Now I'm looking forward to this new role and the new challenges and responsibilities it brings—helping students reach their potential and achieve at high levels. It's a new hat for me and I'm looking forward to it."

Principal Robyn Hawley said, "I am thrilled that Andy Carpenter is our new assistant principal. He has developed strong, positive relationships with staff, students,

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Third-grade families got together for a potluck dinner at Devonshire School in February.

Teachers earn plaudits for technology use

Two first-grade teachers at Jane Stenson School have been recognized for their imaginative use of technology in the classroom. Erin Haring and Jeff Kaplan have been named Exemplary Educators by SMART Technologies, the firm that makes the interactive whiteboards and other technology products used in District 68.

“By winning the Exemplary Educator designation they get to try out a new SMART product such as the new 3D tools for SMART Notebook or new classroom management software, and they can enroll in a training program from the company for free,” said Jennifer Anderson, the district’s instructional technology manager. Anderson encouraged the teachers to apply for the designation.

Haring and Kaplan are not the only teachers to make use of technology for instruction, said Stenson principal Sue O’Neil. “There was a point where some of our teachers were really fluent in technology, while others were more hesitant. But that’s no longer the case, particularly since we now have technology standards to meet and curriculum reviews include a technology component.”

However, O’Neil added, Haring and Kaplan “are creative, innovative teachers who weave technology into their instruction for these very young students. It’s nice for them to get this recognition.”

Haring and Kaplan are among 150 teachers to be named Exemplary Educators in 2012. There are now more than 1,000 people around the world who have received the designation.

Carpenter

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and parents over the years. I am confident that he is ready to take this next step in his career and our school is lucky to have him in this role. This will be a smooth transition for Old Orchard.”

Supt. Frances McTague added, “We’re very fortunate to have the continuity in leadership at the junior high.”

The district has begun the screening process for a new dean of students at the junior high.

SMART Technologies invites teachers, technology specialists and administrators to apply for the program, based on their advanced use of the company’s hardware and software and their willingness to share their technological expertise with others.

Haring’s and Kaplan’s application included information about the amount of time that they use the company’s products in their classrooms, their collaboration with colleagues and the ways in which they have adapted curriculum materials to make learning more interactive. “We also posted lessons that we had created for others to download at no cost,” Haring said.

Kaplan said, “One of the perks of becoming an Exemplary Educator is the opportunity to participate in an online training course free of charge. We have both chosen to take advantage of the lesson development course, which we hope will further advance our abilities in creating interactive learning opportunities for our classrooms.”

Haring, Kaplan and other teachers already use a variety of the company’s products, including interactive white boards, notebook software, SMART Document Camera (a live video feed that projects onto the interactive whiteboard) and SMART Response Clickers. “We are also excited to have the opportunity to test out new products,” Haring said.

They also look forward to being part of the SMART Technologies online network. Both teachers are already using SMART Exchange, an online portal where they can upload lessons that they created and search for lessons created by other teachers. And they have access to an online community of other Exemplary Educators where they can share ideas, best practices and resources with other educators around the world.

Kaplan said it is now the norm for teachers to have lessons and resources available electronically. “While we still use concrete learning materials, the majority of our lessons now utilize SMART products, allowing us the flexibility to do things that are impossible without technology, and engage student attention in an increasingly technology-driven world.”

IN BRIEF

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Gardens

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The original garden appealed mainly to the sense of taste. Because it was planted with items such as tomatoes, basil, peppers, oregano, it was called the “pizza garden.” School families came in during the summer of 2011 to water, weed and harvest.

This year, the Highland gardeners used a \$750 grant from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, along with plants from West End Florist and Garden Center in Evanston, to add a butterfly garden in May. A master gardener from West End consulted on the design, which is expected to attract butterflies this summer.

The garden also received discounts from Home Depot in Evanston, several large tires that will be used as planters from Firestone Auto Care in Skokie, and a rain barrel from the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago.

The next step came in mid-June. Lowe’s Home Improvement contributed \$1,000 in supplies, and volunteers from the store’s Hometown Heroes program joined Highland teachers and families to move dirt and wood chips, build benches, create a stepping-stone path, place bird baths, feeders and houses, install arbors and window boxes, and plant the tire garden.

“This garden has taken off much faster than we expected,” said Highland principal Leslie Gordon. “It’s really Linda Hunsicker’s dream, and I can’t tell you how hard she’s worked on it.”

Gordon said Hunsicker has relied on help from other teachers—especially Nicole Alvear, a master gardener herself—and a number of parents, including Kristin Jacobsen and Julie and Larry Fletcher.

Hunsicker noted, “Kristin Jacobsen has been extraordinarily helpful this year by writing the proposals for the grants we received.”

Hunsicker also pointed out that students from every grade level have contributed to the garden this year, planting vegetables, moving wood chips or painting tires. “Even my little guys were out there, helping to save the worms.” She hopes to get an after-school garden club going next year.

At Jane Stenson School, the \$2,000 Whole Foods grant has been used to purchase mulch, seedlings and much-needed tools for its Global Garden. Stenson also received a \$750 grant from Midwest Gardeners for flowers, a composter and other items.

Stenson principal Sue O’Neil said, “Our garden is a huge success and we’ve been building on what we did last year. We’re now savvy enough that we know how to plant at different times and stagger the harvest. A new group of students joined the garden club, and parent involvement has been terrific.”