

LIFE ON LOPEZ

How one small school embraced their community to create learning you can taste

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety,
Planning With Data, Aligning Curriculum,
Improving Instruction, Managing Resources,
Engaging Communities, Closing the Gap*

Set in the San Juan Islands and tucked in between sheep fields and small family farms lies the Lopez Island School District. Home to 220 students, two coffee shops, and no street lights, it's a "Cheers" community: everyone knows your name and waves to one another on the road.

It is also home to the Lopez Island Farm Education (LIFE) program, where for all of September, all of the ingredients in school meals were sourced within 50 miles of the school. What's more astounding: a majority of the meals are grown entirely in the school's gardens for meals all year round.

WHERE LEARNING IS EDIBLE

In six years, I've learned it takes not a village, but an island to sustain a program where learning is edible. The island is only accessible by ferry, so the school is presented with a unique set of challenges. In fact, it's not unusual for our sports teams to be gone all day, depending on the ferry schedule, and with many of our students on the fire and EMS teams, classes may go empty if there

is a call. The island has strength of perseverance and coming together as a community to prevail over those challenges. This Lopez energy also extends to the school's abundant extracurricular offerings and international travel program, with regular trips to France, Greece, Peru and Japan.

The LIFE program may be one of the first in Washington state, arguably in the country. Elementary students have a Garden Enrichment class and there are two electives for secondary students in Culinary and Sustainable Agricultural Practices. These classes blend life science, biology, mathematical understanding, and engineering practices together to hands-on instruction. These classes and concepts are taught under the ethos of environmental sustainability and represent the island's "let's make it work" attitude.

A program like this relies on the input and hard work of not only the staff, but the community — and in



TOP: LIFE students enjoy the food they harvest in the school meal programs.

RIGHT: Principal Dave Sather.

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many ways the program is a reflection of our island community. We are a community of family farms, passed from generation to generation, and a student body as at home on Google classroom as it is with compost on their fingers.

SOCIAL EQUITY

In mid-September, AWSP came to visit and produced a video on our LIFE program. During the shoot, one student was asked about the “Farm” class he took last year and what he learned from it, and the student rattled the importance of the carbon and nitrogen cycles before talking about the week of canning and fermenting their own food.



Fresh air, hard work and learning go hand in hand in the LIFE program.

So much of our program is hands-on and deeply practical. Our Sustainable Agricultural Practices teacher, Amy Studzienko, developed her curriculum and it was recently approved as a Career and Technical Education course. Students in her course will do seed saving, taxonomy, animal husbandry, and soil health. The class is also seen out and about on the island with its weekly field trips participating with farms on the island. Two years ago, as a class project, we borrowed a goat to teach animal husbandry and to have our field grazed.

The Garden Enrichment for grades K-5, taught by Ali Nicol, is taught alongside art, PE, music, and a



Science you can taste — an apple tree grafting project.

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tinkerlab to widen young students’ curiosity and familiarity to the life cycle. Nicol expressed her satisfaction to watching kindergartners plant, care for, and eventually eat their own peas. “They have a sense of ownership of their own diet and knowledge of how that process works,” she said.

There is also a level of social equity, as everything from the classes to the meals themselves are available to every student, no matter the socio-economic background. For many, the meals at the school may be the only full meals they receive, so it is crucial to have it be nutritious and equitable for all students. Parent Keri Sausman went further, saying, “I feel very grateful that my children have the option to eat healthy, local food for their school lunch. Lopez Island school understands the importance of educating well involves nourishment and a connection to our community.” Alaya Battalia with the Lopez Island Family Resource Center added, “Lopez school lunches guarantee that every student has access to at least one balanced and nutritious meal a day, loaded with vegetables and a bit of curiosity.”

LOPEZ LOCAVORES

Upwards of 40 percent of our elementary student body is eligible

for free and reduced priced lunch. The concept of organic, healthy meals shouldn’t just be isolated to elite schools, it can be done anywhere — so for me, it’s an issue of social justice. Students monitor their BMI and cardiovascular records in Physical Education. Teacher Larry Berg is pleased to show the vast majority of students are “fit” for their age.

Shannon O’Donnell, the school’s head cook, is versatile and puts the pressure on herself to not only locally source the meals, but to make them from scratch. “You find it’s not only better for the students but provides a healthier meal,” she said. A salad bar is always available and even the bulk of the meats are from the island.

Touring the school’s greenhouses with its ripening tomatoes and basil, school gardener Suzanne Berry highlighted the work she does with fellow gardener Valerie Yukluk over the summer, as well as the volunteers from the community. Berry has been with the program and has seen graduating students more aware of where their food comes from. Many are eager to go into culinary or farming careers.

The school’s harvest is used not only in the kitchen and culinary class, but thanks to OSPI’s Healthy Kids

Grant, we bought walk-in freezers to store the summer and fall harvest through the school year. All of this allows students to have meals that are at least 60 percent from the island throughout the year.

Superintendent Brian Auckland said, “The school also is host to the Lopez Locavores, who host ‘an evening meal’ open to the community showcasing the farms and farmers of our island and a gleaning club that collects harvest that otherwise would go to rot for community members in need. This is a partnership involving not only our local farmers, but one reflecting the values of our small, rural and agriculturally friendly community.”

FARM TO SCHOOL

So how did we end up serving meals made up of entirely a 50-mile range from Lopez Island? “The conversation started last spring, when one meal was noticeably ‘all Lopez.’ We went through the menu and realized we had several days where that was the case and decided to aim to make a month like it,” said O’Donnell “I knew of the Alaskan village of Igiugig who served a month of meals subsistence-style, and I knew we could do it here.”

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It was remarkable to watch the pieces come together. Ronni Tartlet & Levi Rodriguez donated apple vinegar, and there was flour that we milled, beans that were grown on Horsedrawn Farm, and, not to mention, the countless volunteers who assisted Suzanne Berry and Valerie Yukluk in a successful harvest.

While other schools are starting their own “Farm to School” programs, many look to us to see what we’ve created and continue to sustain. Several other school districts, most recently the Bellingham School District, visited with a team to see about duplicating our LIFE program.

Lopez is often mentioned as a leader in Farm to School education.

While our circumstances are unique and not every school or district has the same access to farms as we do, it’s not impossible. The LIFE program is unique to us, but the principles behind it — of getting kids outside, providing hands-on learning, and meals that are nutritious — can be found in any district or school. The challenge is bringing the talents of that team together to create something that’s their own. With the will and desire, some creativity, and maybe some grants, I believe any district can create a similar program. ■

Watch our video about the Lopez Island Farm Education program at

<http://bit.ly/awsp-lopez>.

While you’re at it, subscribe to our YouTube channel so you never miss a video.

