Spotlight: Cultivate Charlottesville, Youth Voice and Choice: City Schoolyard Garden, Urban Agriculture Collective, Food Justice Network

Introduction

Cultivate Charlottesville is an integrated approach to building a healthy and just food system personally, in community, and across systems and structures. It is implemented through three core programs:

1. City Schoolyard Garden: hands-on growing with youth in public schools,
2. Urban Agriculture Collective: farming and community market, and
3. Food Justice Network: advocacy and partnerships.

Cultivate Charlottesville's Farm to School work is centered on a commitment to address racial inequities, promote systems change, and center the voices and choices of people experiencing food inequities. Each year the nonprofit hires ten Food Justice Interns who not only maintain school gardens but also distribute produce, determine which school and community food justice issues they want to tackle, and implement strategies for change. With more than 50 food security and hunger relief organizations operating in Charlottesville, Cultivate Charlottesville is striving to leverage Farm to School efforts as a tool to decrease food insecurity and health disparities.

The Challenge

While Charlottesville is known for its strong local food advocates, the food system does not serve everyone equally. Hunger, food insecurity, and poverty are entrenched problems that fall mostly along racial lines. In Charlottesville, 17.5 percent or one in six residents face food insecurity (prior to COVID-19), outpacing Virginia's average of 11 percent. People with fewer economic resources and people of color suffer higher rates of diet-related diseases. In Charlottesville City Schools (CCS) over 58 percent of the student population is eligible to receive free and reduced-price meals; in some individual neighborhoods, this number runs as high as 90 percent. These challenges are, in part, the result of development practices and resistance to desegregating schools. Despite these challenges, neighbors have come together with ingenuity and purpose over the years to grow and share food through urban farms and schoolyard gardens.

The Solution

Cultivate Charlottesville launched in 2010 with one schoolyard garden at Buford Middle School. Since then, the program has grown to address the complex problems associated with food inequity across the community. In our public schools, the Cultivate City Schoolyard Garden program engages youth in nine schoolyard and neighborhood gardens during the school day,

after school, and in the summer. The program includes multiple opportunities for youth to taste and experience healthy foods, grow foods in the garden, and serve as leaders in their community.

By centering youth voice and choice, Cultivate Charlottesville works with youth as leaders from an early age. Students design their gardens, choose which plants to grow, cook onsite to taste what they grow, and learn how to share their garden stories with others.

The **Youth Food Justice Interns** is an example of how middle and high school students practice the theme of 'stepping into leadership'. Each year Cultivate Charlottesville hires a cohort of 10 youth from Charlottesville middle and high schools to work and manage the school gardens, learn about food equity, and lead youth throughout the division. The produce grown is shared at a weekly community market at no cost to residents. The intern crew learns about the racial history of food justice within the city and across the country as it applies, and they host community events such as the Spring Seedling Giveaway where students grow and give away over 10,000 vegetable, herb, and flower transplants to community members and nonprofits. Throughout, students are not only taking part in the fun experience of growing a garden, they are building a foundation for a broad understanding of our food system and how larger systems of inequity influence outcomes.

The Impact

Cultivate Charlottesville's roots are in delivering programming that educates and engages youth in nature through garden-based experiences and leadership. Through these activities, students learn about and enjoy gardening, fresh produce, and healthy and active lifestyles. Youth develop leadership skills, advocacy skills, community engagement, and confidence. Each year, Cultivate Charlottesville measures and celebrates how much students taste and enjoy new produce, step into leadership, feel connected, and contribute to their communities. Evaluations conducted over the past five years have shown that positive effects on youth are enhanced through the bountiful and rich experiences in the garden and with their Garden Coordinator mentors. In addition, youth are motivated to make changes in their environment. Over the past two years, Youth Food Justice Interns have consulted their peers, met with the CCS Nutrition Administrator, tested recipes, and developed a five-year plan to transition the school meal program to include more fresh, from scratch, local items. They presented their plan to the city council and the school board and it has been adopted and funded through local partners. Centering student voice and choice invests in long-term food equity.

Tips for Replication

Core Cultivate Charlottesville strategies and practices that amplify equity in Farm to School efforts include:

- **Practice anti-racism** – Cultivate has been learning about and implementing anti-racist organizational practices since 2013 and still has areas to grow. It is a long-term commitment. **Center youth voice and choice** – By building leadership into their programs from the youngest students through to their internship program, the City Schoolyard Garden program strived to center youth ideas and preferences. Students, for example, came up with the idea of launching a Food Justice Intern program when they did not want garden classes to end with the school year.
- **Build and engage partnership** – Farm to School is part of a larger food system. To create equity across this system, it is critical to build partnerships.
- **Work at multiple levels and intersections** –While Cultivate Charlottesville started by focusing on one schoolyard garden at their middle school, focusing on racial equity expanded their focus to understanding more about other systems that affect students' ability to engage. For example, without transportation, some students were not able to stay for afterschool garden club. Work with partners to fill those gaps.
- **Embrace learning and adapt** – There is always more to learn and practice around building equity into a Farm to School program. Make time for reflection and learning, and adapt with humility.
- **Cultivate broad base support** - Multifaceted work requires multifaceted support.

Resources

[Cultivate Charlottesville](). Accessed 23 May 2021.

National Farm to School Network. *[Racial and Social Equity Assessment Tool for Farm to School Programs and Policy]()*, April 2019. This framework guides organizational decision making processes in the context of structural, institutional, and interpersonal racism.

Food Solutions New England Sustainability Institute. *[21-Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge]()*. Archived materials are available year-round to prompt discussion and develop actions to dismantle racism in the food system and the world.

Author

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Photos and Images

Image file name: Cultivate Food Justice Interns

Image description/alt text: Seven Food Justice Interns show their commitment to food equity as they stand in solidarity at their urban farm

Photo subjects, left to right: n/a

Photo credit: Cultivate Charlottesville

Media release on file: Yes

Image file name: Land Is Liberation Mural by Cultivate Charlottesville Food Justice Interns

Image description/alt text: A mural created by the Youth Food Justice Interns that includes a land is liberation theme

Photo subjects, left to right: n/a

Photo credit: Cultivate Charlottesville

Media release on file: Yes