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Benjamin J. Spoden
Parkland College

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Improving School Lunches and Environment Through On-Site Gardens

By

Benjamin Spoden

Lunch within the American school system is changing steadily. This change of course does not come without criticism and debate. Washington D.C. passed unanimously passed legislation of the *“Healthy Schools Act of 2010.”* The importance of establishing this act into law is the resonance it casts across the country. This act is intended to greatly improve the health, wellness and nutrition in public and charter school students in D.C.

According to *“foodsafteynews.com, More than 55 percent of the residents of the District of Columbia are overweight or obese—including nearly half of all children.”* In the United States, more than 30 percent of American children are obese, and the risks to children’s health are also risks to the economy, with billions of dollars spent each year treating obesity-related conditions like heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. *“The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have identified increased fresh fruit and vegetable consumption as one of six top strategies to control and prevent obesity.”* (foodsaftey.com)

In Illinois, on July 17th 2010, Governor Pat Quinn signed into effect bill SB 615. This is also known as the *“Illinois Food, Farms and Jobs Act.”*

With this bill, a database was created to connect schools to local farms that can provide fresh local produce to schools. This bill also will facilitate a system that will allow purchasing between local farms and participating schools. Let's face it. The majority of public schools are constantly fighting budgets to properly supply students with the basic materials and programs needed on an academic level, let alone any new curriculum. One very interesting bill that was recently passed in Washington D.C. is the "*Child Nutrition Bill*" signed on December 12th 2012. According to the Huffington Post "*The \$4.5 billion measure increases the federal reimbursement for free school lunches by 6 cents a meal at a time when many school officials say they can't afford to provide the meals. The bill will also expand access to free lunch programs and allow 20 million additional after-school meals to be served annually in all 50 states. Most states now only provide money for after-school snacks.*"

As a 2013 Landscape Design and Horticulture graduate, I have to ask myself a few questions that will define my future career. Questions like, "How do I use this education to support myself and family?" "How can I stand out among other professionals in my field?" "How can I incorporate these skills and my passion for horticulture to benefit the community?" I think the wheels are already in motion on a farm to school basis for helping students acquire

healthier foods. The health of our community can greatly benefit from exploring this idea, and taking action with support of our school districts to solidify this change.

Somewhere between all of the politics, administrative challenges and the local school community is where I wish to find my career. I propose a dedicated on-site garden at our local schools that cater directly to the existing school lunch program. One local example supporting this idea is the *"Schools Chef Challenge."* School district 116 and Unit 4 in cooperation with Champaign Mayor Don Gerard and Laura Huth, created this program in 2011 to fund the building of school gardens, bring healthier foods to kids and increase food education. A second example that I have found is in Danville IL through a website called "edibleschoolyard.org" This has been a great resource that illustrates the many schools across the country that have taken this idea seriously. Unfortunately, there are few other local examples that I have found that are moving this idea forward. I view the lack of local programs as a great opportunity to continue my search as to *why* these programs are not readily available to our students. As a former community garden supervisor for Meadowbrook Park, I believe start-up of a garden would not be at all exorbitant. My personal goals to accomplish a broader understanding of making this a reality are as follows.

Step one: Gain multiple perspectives from the following people.

Mayor Don Gerard-volunteer for helping with “The Chef’s Challenge”

Jaclyn Marganski-Administrator for Northeast Elementary School-Danville IL

Kristin Camp-Science and Health Curriculum Coordinator at Unit 4 School

District. Champaign IL

Step two: Create detailed proposal & design taking all possible perspectives in mind.

Use other existing resources such as www.schoolgardenwizard.org, <http://edibleschoolyard.org/> as a reference.

Step three: Meet once again with Don Bergfield of Parkland College to discuss the overall direction of this project. Revise proposal if needed, and approach grant writers with this idea.

I am adamant on accomplishing these three short-term goals before February 2013. I have much perspective to gain. Most of all, I am extremely excited to combine my passion for landscape design/build into a career that will provide a healthier future for students to come.