Toki Middle School Outdoor Classroom

WE LOVE our outdoor classroom because:
• our entire student body (over 500 kids!) has contributed to building/maintaining the garden
• no fences allowed. The produce is for everyone, and all are welcome in the garden at any time
• it’s a natural equalizer for our students. You can’t be ‘wrong’ in the garden. Nobody knows everything, and everybody can contribute something

Introduction

Akira R. Toki Middle School is one of eleven public schools in the Madison Metropolitan School District. Located at 5606 Russett Road in Madison, WI, Toki Middle School is in the Orchard Ridge neighborhood on the southwestern side of the city of Madison. Toki Middle School has a school population of 523 students throughout grades six, seven and eight. Toki Middle School offers special education plans for students who need one. There is the option for free and reduced lunch for those students who are in need.

Toki Middle School is diverse in its student body across both racial and socio-economic lines. Out of the 523 students, 0.2% identified as American Indian or Alaska Native. 9.4% of students identified as Asian of Pacific Islander. 28.7% of students identified themselves as Black, not Hispanic and 13.2% of students identified themselves as Hispanic. The remaining 48.6% of the student population identified as White, not Hispanic. Other demographic groups include the following categories: 13.4% of students have a disability, 12.0% of students are limited English proficient, and 43.4% of students are economically disadvantaged.

Garden Based Outdoor Education has existed at Toki Middle School since the spring semester of 2012. Since the spring semester of 2012, Toki has become a GROW Garden Pilot School and
received funding through the Digging In Grant. Looking to the future, Toki Middle School is evaluating how its Garden Program functions and how to sustain it Garden Based Outdoor Education programing. There are a few identified problems with the garden that need solutions as Toki looks forward in its garden programming.

**Garden Development**

At Toki Middle School, there is a Green Team that is in charge of the school garden, including the curriculum development, teaching and maintenance. The Green Team consists of the following staff and faculty: Carlene Bechen, an Instructional Coach, Dana Serwe, a 6th Grade Language Arts Teacher, Mark Siegel, a 6th Grade Science Teacher, Nicole Schaefer, the Toki Middle School Principle, and two parents of Toki Middle School students.

The origin of Toki Middle School’s garden is traced back to several years ago when Toki was looking at becoming an Expeditionary Learning School. Carlene Bechen wrote a grant to the Foundation for Madison Public Schools for 10,000 dollars, which was funded, to do professional development for staff and visits to other United States Expeditionary Learning Schools to learn how those schools functioned and included Garden Based Education into their curriculum. The following year, the Board of Education earmarked 60,000 dollars for Toki Middle School to continue exploring what becoming an Expeditionary Learning School would entail. A central feature of Expeditionary Learning Schools are its Learning Expeditions, which are cross content, cross discipline, and address a relevant, authentic question that curriculum can be related to.
In terms of incorporating Expeditionary Learning in the Toki Middle School curriculum, the sixth grade teachers were interested in creating a school garden in which their pre-established curriculum would be able to work. The sixth grade teachers were interested in creating a garden specifically because there were already garden-based curriculum themes in the sixth grade curriculum. Examples of this included that fact that many sixth graders already read the book *Seedfolks* in their literature class and experience as community like that in *Seedfolks*, based on “….the whole idea of kids coming from different elementary schools to be in one school”, reported by Carlene Bechen. The science theme for sixth grade is Diversity of Life (includes biology, botany, physiology, weather and water), which supports the theme of a diversity community. These two components, the science and the literature, combined, supported the development of Toki’s garden-based education program.

The sixth grade teachers, along with Carlene Bechen, worked with Jenny Sidel, a school designer specializing in Expeditionary Learning, to put together a garden curriculum for Toki Middle School. While Toki was exploring the ideas and concepts of Expeditionary Learning, the GROW Coalition released its Digging In Grant, which Toki Middle School applied for. Their grant was based on what Toki had already been doing with their small school garden. Their garden was used each sixth grade “Crew” class, a class modeled like a homeroom. Each Crew Class chose a place around the campus to do something garden related, as in a butterfly garden, perennial garden, sunflower ring, etc. The Digging In Grant was seen as a way to focus the garden curriculum and a way to gain monetary support for future development of the garden space.
During the first year of the Digging In Grant, 2012-2013 school year, the sixth graders worked to create a garden design. The students were involved in selecting possible sites for the garden. Carlene Bechen explained how “kids…could do the pros and cons of each of their sites and then bring it to the group [for a vote]…it was very, very collaborative”. In April of 2013 the sixth grade students presented their garden proposals at the annual Earth Day Every Day Event Toki Middle School hosts. The garden design proposals were then given to Shelly Stram, of Community Action Coalition, to design a final garden that included the various proposals from the sixth graders for first phase of the garden instillation. The final site for the garden was selected based on least amount of foot traffic from students, access to water, sunlight and the building.

The first phase of the garden installation happened in May and June of 2013. Shelly Stram and her team led this first installation. It included a sunburst design of raised bed gardens with an octagonal garden in the center of the sunburst. Grant money was used in the first year to build and install a garden shed.

In 2014, there was a second phase of the garden installation. A main theme of the second phase of the garden installation included the spelling out of “Toki” in throughout the garden using various garden elements. Straw bales were used to spell “Toki” and will be used for planting the 2015 garden season. A garden trellis was built in the second phase. The trellis was built to block distractions from the garden that can be seen from classrooms that overlook the garden. Old, over grown bushes were cut down for legs to tables in the garden. A teaching station was added to the garden shed and an outdoor sink and counter were added, using both grant money and
donations. The money from the grant needed to be spent by June 2014. Storage bins were bought to hold garden tools and other teaching materials, like hand crank blenders.

Staff Development

During the summer after Toki Middle School applied for the Digging In Grant, sixth grade staff, Carlene Bechen and Jenny Sidel developed a process for the garden curriculum that included all of the curricular areas of sixth grade. Each academic area of sixth was included in the garden development curriculum. Each Crew Class had a physical crate that traveled with them to each class period that included all their worksheets from other classes. It was a collaborative effort among the entire sixth grade staff and development team.

Sixth grade is the primary grade that is involved with the development and maintenance of the school garden. This is due to the fact the sixth grade curriculum fits with the idea of the garden well. There is classroom space in the garden so that any grades can hold class outside and the art program has the option of incorporating its curriculum with the garden. Currently, the seventh graders are working to develop a rain garden at Toki Middle School but that is a separate project from the garden entirely. The rain garden project was funded by a grant from Friends of Lake Wingra. The garden is not used during recess and students are not allowed to go into the garden without supervision.

Most of the sixth grade teachers did not have prior knowledge of gardening before taking a job at Toki Middle School. Of the sixth grade teaching team, only two teachers had gardens at their
childhood homes. As the garden grew and developed, the sixth grade teaching team became more comfortable with being in the garden and growing plants. Since the garden is mainly used as a teaching tool, teachers have also grown comfortable with the fact that although having a plant die is not the necessarily the desired outcome of the garden, the fact that the student learns through the process of gardening is. Seven of the sixth grade teachers have gone through Troy Community Garden and Community Groundworks’ Growing Minds Program.

**Future of the Garden**

Plans for future Garden Based Outdoor Education at Toki Middle School depends on future funding for such programs. Currently, Toki Middle School has some sources of funding beyond the GROW Grant but are looking for more sustainable, long-term sources. Toki received money from the Madison Food Policy Council’s Seed Grant in 2014 to host a summer camp in the garden for summer 2014 and summer 2015. Toki will need money for both supplies and the continuing development of garden based curriculum. For Spring of 2015 and beyond, Toki is in the process of deciding if they will develop their garden based education further or if they only have the resources to maintain the garden. While Toki received money from the GROW Coalition, they often used that money as a catalyst for receiving other funds from various other grants and foundations.

In the future, Carlene Bechen stressed the importance of hiring a Garden Coordinator. According to Ms. Bechen, a garden coordinator would be critical in maintaining the garden and ensuring it is a sustainable part of Toki Middle School. Ms. Bechen envisions the role of the Garden Coordinator as the person who knows the curriculum, what the garden needs, etc. The Garden
Coordinator would be responsible for the well-being of the garden and be a resource for the teachers and staff of Toki Middle School. The reason why Toki does not currently employ a Garden Coordinator is due to a lack of funds, and Ms. Bechen believes that the Toki Green Team should investigate ways to receiving funding for a Coordinator. Ms. Bechen stated that “it is not like we would need a full time garden coordinator, but if we could share somebody between us, Hamilton and Spring Harbor because we are all close and all have gardens…would be ideal for us”.

GBOE and the Community

Toki Middle School attempts to involve its community in a few ways with its garden. During the Earth Day Every Day Conference in 2013, the sixth graders asked for feedback from the community on what the garden design should include. Toki also hosts Garden Work Days in which all parents and community members are invited to participate in. In the future, Ms. Bechen would like to see more of a variety of opportunities for parents and families to be involved with the garden as many parents are employed full time and need to know well in advance of garden activities if they wish to be involved. Toki Middle School is located in a documented food insecure zone in Madison. Ms. Bechen sees the garden as a way in “helping kids to think about choosing to eat Hot Flaming Cheetos or fresh salsa and tortilla chips”.

Meadow Wood Center has been identified as a potential partner for summer programming with the garden. Toki would like to have a garden club with Meadow Wood Center once a week in the summer months. Toki Middle School has received money from Orchard Ridge UCC Church, a nearby church. The produce that the garden produces in the summer months is given to both the
Good Shepherd Food Pantry and the Meadow Wood Food Pantry. The garden is seen as a pickers plot—so community members and families are invited to come and pick the produce at any time at no cost.

**Appendices**

Interview participants—Carlene Bechen

Site Visit—March 11th 2015

Word Count—2001