

Farm-to-table program gives students food for thought

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5:24 PM, May 13, 2014 |

ithacajournal.com

A new program for South Hill Elementary School first graders is breaking new ground — and planting a few vegetables too.

South Hill teachers Nancy Marino, Kathleen White and Patti Caughey created the “Farm-to-Table: Healthy Food for All People” program to tie all the subjects their first-grade students study — from reading and writing to social studies, math, science, even physical education — around the unified theme of farming and healthy food.

“The biggest thing for me is that children are learning skills in a context that makes sense to them,” Marino said in an interview. “They are not learning random lessons that don’t all tie into one thing. I really believe that young people learn best when it’s not in fragments, when it all fits together somehow.”

The yearlong curriculum features field trips to a farms and orchards, classroom presentations by experts including a corn tortilla factory owner and a beekeeper, and workshops with a Cornell Cooperative Extension master gardener.

First-grade students and their families spent Saturday afternoon building a garden at the school, which they stocked with vegetables grown in their classrooms: cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, kale and collards.

Marino said it was a challenge to create a full yearlong curriculum that weaves together various disciplines with a single theme. While the program is unique and forward-thinking, Marino said it also reflects a type of traditional teaching that has largely fallen by the wayside.

“I think the whole philosophy around education has changed,” she said. “There are so many things that teachers are being asked to do now — the Common Core, all the standards, the data collection, the assessments — we’ve lost sight of teaching like this.”

The farm-to-table program is supported with grant money from Ithaca Public Education Initiative and New York Agriculture in the Classroom, and has also received donations from Green Tree, Cayuga Landscaping, Home Depot, Dryden Agway and the Ithaca City School District.

On June 17 South Hill first graders will be selling various food products they have created at the 25th Taste of the Nation Ithaca to raise money for local hunger relief services.

“We’re talking about 21st century skills for students, and making meaning and connection and empowering and engaging,” South Hill Principal Samantha Little said. “If you want to be able to have meaningful learning take place and it not be just about the Common Core, this is how you make it happen.”