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Student's Health Enhances Academic Performance

BY PAT KACZMAREK

Recently SE Portland residents Mark and Brenda Saling welcomed friends and neighbors to their home to discuss ways to improve school lunches and support children's health and academic success. The discussion is part of A Gathering of Good (AGOG), a series of events organized by Metropolitan Family Service to promote face-to-face conversation, civic engagement and social change.

This year, AGOG discussions focus on the topic of Building Healthy Communities. Metropolitan Family Service contacted local experts to facilitate the discussion including Dr. Michelle Markesteyn Ratcliffe, Farm to School Program Manager with the Oregon Department of Agriculture, and Caitlin Blethen, Youth Grow Manager at Growing Gardens.

The conversation started with discussion about the school lunch program. Oregon is one of only a handful of states that does not provide state support for school food in addition to federal funding. Schools have a total food budget of \$1.10 to \$1.18 per student for all the food on the plate.

Even without state funding, Portland Public Schools is leading the way in improving school food and teaching students where their food comes from.

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PPS Nutrition Services is a leader in Farm to School and local purchasing and participates in a national initiative helping large school districts (with 40,000 or more students) procure more healthful, more sustainably produced and regionally sourced food such as grass fed beef and local chicken. Dr. Ratcliffe noted that gardens have been shown to contribute to the development of the whole child.

Creating a community school garden is an opportunity to support student health and well-

ness, encourage students social and emotional development and enhance academic achievement. School-community gardens offer opportunities for kids to genuinely engage in lifelong learning.

Foods grown in the garden can also be used to supplement school lunch offerings in the cafeteria, create tasting tables that feature a certain harvest, and can be incorporated into classroom curricula.

Over 40 Portland Public Schools now have school gardens. Amidst concerns about losing financial support for arts and physical education classes, the parents who attended this AGOG discussion are optimistic: "If we build it, they will come!"

Metropolitan Family Service offers SUN and CAFE (Child and Family Enrichment) after school programs at 24 low-income school sites in the area. The percentage of children who participate in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program is as high as 93% at some schools MFS serves. Six of these sites feature community gardens which kids and community members have helped build and continue to nurture.

To read the full summary about school provided food, school-community gardens and ways you can support healthy habits in schools, as well as other discussions in the AGOG dinner & discussion series, visit www.agatheringofgood.org.