



Academy for Global Citizenship: A Green Charter School Sprouts in Chicago

Organic lunches, schoolyard composting and CSAs are transforming young lives—and an entire community.

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A typical organic lunch is served at the Academy for Global Citizenship School in Chicago, Illinois. (Photo: Alex Garcia/Chicago Tribune/MCT via Getty Images)

After school one day last fall, about 200 families from an underserved community on Chicago's Southwest Side gathered at their children's school, the [Academy for Global Citizenship \(AGC\)](#), for a tasting.

Parents and students milled about, sampling adventurous items that are the school's everyday dining fare—such as quinoa oatmeal and tempeh chili— before heading home with recipe cards and a bag of fresh fruit.

More recently, a handful of parents attended a backyard-composting workshop at the school where they learned how to mix the browns and greens in composters that were handed out at the event.

And yet another AGC workshop involved teaching families how to find lumber and build planters for home vegetable gardens.

“There is not too much easy access to organic food around here,” says Dan Schnitzer, AGC's director of sustainability and operations. The school is located in a food desert, a low-income urban area where processed foods reign. “We want to create a mind shift in the generations.”

collaboration within the community” is not new in the world of green charter schools, but it is gaining traction across the country.

“I think it’s the second wave of sustainability,” says Jim McGrath, president of the national Green Charter Schools Network.

Over the past three years, McGrath says the number of green charter schools has tripled. As they grow, he says, they are looking to achieve more than just healthy hallways.

“These schools are becoming the centerpiece for change in communities, especially in demographic areas that are high in poverty and low in healthy options.”

It would be tough to find a better example of green living than the Academy for Global Citizenship. AGC offers its 250 (and growing) students a daily organic breakfast and lunch. The children’s core education standards are taught through an International Baccalaureate framework that introduces them to global issues by way of their own backyard, such as sustainable architecture and water solutions.

Weather permitting, the children work in a schoolyard habitat and vegetable garden, composting and emptying rain barrels. At their zero-waste lunches, they sort their food and garbage into recyclables and organics. They learn about solar energy in an on-site learning laboratory and wind power from the school’s turbine. Last but not least, the children take turns caring for the school’s three egg-laying chickens, which are housed in a green roof chicken coop.

In its four years of existence, AGC has become an environmental model for the surrounding neighborhood, where 75 percent of its students live.

Sarah Elizabeth Ippel, the school’s founder and executive director, says teachers used to initiate their workshops and events—like family literacy night. Now, she says, families are driving the scope of their extracurricular programs by asking for educational materials and guidance.

“We’ve seen a transfer of empowerment as parents become incredible leaders,” she says. “We’ve had families who have created gardens and who are now raising chickens. We have moms who have created a green cleaning business. They are learning and translating [our schooling] into action and initiative.”

AGC, which currently houses K-4th graders but adds a class each year, has already helped communities far beyond Chicago.

The school, which recently won a national Green Ribbon Schools Award and in 2010 received the HealthierUS School Challenge Gold with Distinction Award, published a best practices handbook that serves as a guide for schools striving to be sustainable.

And AGC has participated in producing an organic edible garden manual to help schools create safe gardens, and it often opens its doors to national and international visitors (over 4,000 so far) looking for inspiration.

Ippel, 31, is currently building a new AGC Net Positive school in Chicago on 11 urban acres; by 2020 it will be home to 750 children from pre-K through 12th grade.

But for now, students and their families are content to gather at their current school, housed in an old dental tool factory, where they can purchase CSA boxes loaded with fresh organic veggies every week and learn how to work in the garden beds. After all, the most powerful tools in education don’t have to be high tech.

“Kids love to dig in dirt and find roly-polies,” says Schnitzer, who is keeping one of the planters free of vegetables this year so the children can run their fingers through the soil. “They use their imagination to find fossils. Kids are meant to explore the world and learn from it.”