Promoting Health in Minnesota Schools:

SCHOOL GARDENS

As society becomes more aware of and concerned with children’s health issues, communities are turning to schools to provide an environment that promotes both healthy eating and physical activity.¹ School policies supporting healthy eating and physical activity are an important component of school efforts to promote the health and well-being of school children. Good nutrition and physical activity help “contribute to improved academic performance, attendance rates, behavior, and lifelong health and well-being.”² A strong school garden policy is one way to promote healthy eating and physical activity and provide students with practical knowledge that will help them eat healthful foods throughout their lives.³

What are school gardens?

While school gardens may vary in how they are structured, school gardens typically have a few things in common:

- The garden is located on school property.
- Students actively help create and maintain the garden.
- The garden is established to provide educational, recreational, and healthy eating opportunities for students.⁴

School gardens help children understand the source of their food and how food choices impact their bodies, the environment, and their communities.⁵

Why are school gardens important?

School gardens provide a dynamic environment for students to observe, discover, experiment, nurture, and learn.⁶ A school garden is a “living laboratory” where lessons are drawn from real life experiences, allowing students to be more active participants in the learning process.⁷ School gardens can be integrated into the school in two key ways – first, school gardens can contribute to the overall educational curriculum to teach children about subjects as varied as English, language arts, math, science, and social studies.⁸ In addition, school gardens offer opportunities for fun, physical activity, and improved nutrition.⁹ School gardens can provide fresh produce that can be included as part of the school food service program. Children have added motivation to eat fruits and vegetables that they helped to grow.¹⁰
Do any federal or Minnesota laws require school gardens?

No. While schools may voluntarily start school garden programs (and incorporate school garden foods into the cafeteria),\textsuperscript{11} school gardens are not mandated by Minnesota or federal law.\textsuperscript{12}

Are there legal prohibitions against the use of garden produce in a school food program?

In Minnesota, the only barriers to the use of school garden-grown food in cafeterias may come from local school districts themselves if they choose to limit how school garden produce can be used.\textsuperscript{13} Nothing in federal or state law prohibits schools from serving produce from a school garden as part of the school’s food service as long as all applicable state and local health and sanitation laws are followed.\textsuperscript{14} In addition, food served as part of the federal school nutrition programs must meet federal nutrition standards for school meals. Food from gardens must be integrated into school menus in a way that fits with these standards.\textsuperscript{15}

To support the use of school garden produce in school cafeterias, the USDA provides competitive grants to schools to initiate and implement school garden programs.\textsuperscript{16} The produce from a school garden can be served in a reimbursable meal or sold a la carte to students, parents, PTA members, and others. In addition, funds from the school food service account can be used to purchase seeds and other equipment for a school garden so long as the school garden is part of the school food program (i.e. produce is either sold to students or used as part of the educational curriculum).\textsuperscript{17}

Does the Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA)\textsuperscript{18} Model Wellness Policy\textsuperscript{19} address school gardens?

No, not specifically.

Could existing MSBA policies be used to support the creation and management of a school garden?

Yes. The MSBA has several model policies that could be adapted to support the creation and management of a school garden, such as:

- 512 (School-Sponsored Student Publications and Activities)
- 513 (Student Promotion, Retention, and Program Design)
- 601 (School District Curriculum and Instruction Goals)
- 604 (Instructional Curriculum)
- 805 (Waste Reduction and Recycling)
- 807 (Health and Safety)
- 901 (Community Education)
- 902 (Use of School District Facilities and Equipment)
How can a Minnesota school incorporate school gardens into a school wellness policy?

The following language can be incorporated into a school board policy that follows the MSBA’s model. This language can also be individually tailored to fit into a school board policy that does not follow the MSBA’s model policy.

Addition to the MSBA School Wellness Policy

III. GUIDELINES

F. School Gardens

1. The school district will support the use of school property to promote nutrition, physical activity, and curricular and co-curricular activities through school gardens. The school district will support the sustainability of school gardens through activities including, but not limited to, fundraising, solicitation of community donations, use of existing resources, and allocation of school district funds.

2. School gardens ensure students have the opportunity to experience planting, harvesting, preparing, serving, and tasting self-grown food that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the student population. The school district supports the incorporation of school gardens into the standards-based curriculum as a hands-on, interdisciplinary teaching tool to influence student food choices and lifelong eating habits.

3. The superintendent has the authority to designate school property as a school garden and negotiate the terms of the agreements and licenses needed to create and maintain a school garden. The superintendent will ensure that the development of a school garden includes necessary coordination with appropriate representatives of the school buildings and grounds department.

4. The superintendent, with the assistance of the School Health Council, will develop guidelines for school gardens. These superintendent guidelines will include:
   a. An explanation of how the school garden program fits into the standards-based curriculum and curriculum guidelines of the school district;
   b. How the costs of the school garden, including materials, supplies, water, and personnel, will be funded;
   c. How the school garden will be maintained during and outside of the school year, including identification of school staff who will supervise and maintain the garden; and
   d. How the school garden will be used and how the harvest of the garden will be distributed.

5. The superintendent or designee will review existing school board policy and recommend updates to any other school board policies to incorporate the goals and objectives of school gardens, including school grounds, curriculum and community use policies.
What other ways are there to support school gardens?

In Minnesota, the superintendent is responsible for implementing and enforcing school board policy. Superintendents issue protocols, procedures, and guidelines to help implement the school board’s policies. The following language can be incorporated into existing guidelines. However, as school boards and superintendents may adopt more specific or general guidelines based on their needs and goals, policy language can be interchangeable with the guidelines listed below.

### School Garden Guidelines

- The school will establish an instructional garden of sufficient size to provide students with experiences in planting, harvesting, preparation, serving, and tasting foods, integrated with the school’s core curriculum and supporting state curriculum standards.
- Faculty and staff will provide hands-on experiences and enriched activities such as farm field studies, farmers’ markets tours, and visits to community gardens so students understand how food reaches the table and the implications for their health and future.
- Sampling and tasting of foods grown in school gardens is encouraged.
- Teachers and food service personnel are encouraged to utilize food from school gardens in classrooms and cafeterias.
- Schools will promote food-centered activities that are healthy, enjoyable, developmentally appropriate, culturally relevant, and participatory.
- Students will be provided opportunities for physical activity through participation in school gardening programs.
- School staff is encouraged to integrate the school garden, nutrition education, and cooking and eating experiences into the core academic curriculum for math, science, social studies, and language arts at all grade levels as appropriate.
- Food service personnel and teachers will receive professional development jointly to facilitate a more coordinated approach to integrating classroom lessons with experiences in gardens, kitchen classrooms, and the cafeteria.
- The schools’ nutrition services will coordinate their menus based on the produce available from the school garden so that school meals will reflect seasonality and local agriculture.
- Students will be offered the opportunity to participate in outdoor education programs that make connections between diet, health, the environment, and the interdependence of living things.

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Endnotes


7 Id.


12 Id. at 1.

13 Id. at 5.


17 Memorandum from Cynthia Long, supra note 14.

18 LEAGUE OF MINNESOTA CITIES, HANDBOOK FOR MINNESOTA CITIES 17:14 (2012), available at http://www.lmc.org/media/document/1/chapter17.pdf (“The Minnesota School Boards Association (MSBA) supports, promotes and enhances the work of public school boards. MSBA is a private nonprofit organization that provides technical assistance; cost-saving programs; and advocacy, training, research, and referral services for all of Minnesota’s public [school] members. Membership in MSBA is voluntary.”).
