

Hydroponic Garden at Hart's Hill Teaching Students, One Seed at a Time

Erin Huggins wears many hats. She's a teacher aide at Hart's Hill Elementary School, as well as president of the Hart's Hill PTO and a parent. She's also the brainchild of Hart's Hill's hydroponic garden.

"Maybe I do have a green thumb after all," said Huggins.

But, it's more than her green thumb, it's her vision. Huggins, along with Lisa Putnam, principal at Hart's Hill, started a hydroponic garden in 2014. A hydroponic garden is the growing of plants using mineral nutrient solutions in water, without soil. Since then, the garden has proved to be a great educational tool for students of all ages.

"Every classroom has found a way to incorporate it into the common core curriculum," said Putnam. "Some classes study the garden and are writing, some are graphing and some are reading. The garden is tailored to serve every class and every subject."

It also allows for textbooks to occasionally be pushed aside. "Instead of a kid reading an abstract thing, the garden is hands on," said Huggins.

When Hart's Hill Elementary School became the first school in the area to start an indoor hydroponic garden last year, the idea was part of a much larger vision. Hart's Hill piloted the idea through a partnership with Oneida-Herkimer-Madison (OHM) BOCES and its Science Center. In just over a year, the garden fever, with the help of OHM BOCES, has spread to Whitesboro's Marcy Elementary School and schools in Utica, Sauquoit and Waterville.

At Hart's Hill, the "Green Team," made up of more than 100 fourth and fifth graders, take care of the hydroponic garden. The students take turns watering, pruning and transplanting, while students in other grades study the garden.

In addition to being an educational tool, the hydroponic gardens are also a tasty treat and encourage healthy eating. So far, there have been two "Farm to School Days" at Hart's Hill. Last year, students used basil from the hydroponic garden to make basil pizza. This year, students used lettuce and cucumbers from the hydroponic garden to make salad. The food was served to all students during lunch. Several students tried the foods - - that they normally may not have eaten - - because the vegetables were from the hydroponic garden.

"We had such a hard winter and when you go into that room and see everything growing, you just feel better," said Huggins. "It brings us together as a school."

This spring, students at Hart's Hill will be planting flowers and many will be able to eventually bring those flowers home, completing what Putnam says is the ultimate educational experience.

“What we start in the classroom is taken home. The learning and the fun never stops.”