Learn it | Grow it | Eat it
Sustainability Through Healthy Eating

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High School students in five Bronx, New York City High Schools are talking food. Small groups of students visit the corner store and survey the drink choices; others demonstrate to their classmates how much sugar is in a popular soft drink. Classes visit the Jacqueline Denise Davis Community Garden two blocks away to pull weeds, plant seeds and see earthworms, ladybugs and birds in action.

What is going on here? The Learn it, Grow it, Eat it project is the catalyst behind all this. Why engage high school students in these activities?

Food: Abundance and Disparity

First time visitors to New York City might easily think that they have landed in food heaven. With nearly 20,000 restaurants¹ and over 1,000 mid-to-large-sized grocery stores and supermarkets² that cater to dozens of ethnicities, the city is teeming with a fantastic variety of fresh and prepared foods available 24/7. However, this bounty is not spread evenly throughout the city. Termed the “grocery gap” by some, many low-income neighborhoods have only limited access to fresh, healthy foods. Lacking decent sized supermarkets, these neighborhoods tend to be filled with fast-food restaurants and small grocers that often don’t offer such basics as fresh fruits and vegetables, low-fat milk, and whole wheat bread.

At the same time, underserved communities suffer a disproportionately high number of health problems that can be linked to unhealthy eating. In low-income neighborhoods throughout the city, residents are more likely to die from diabetes and other obesity-related problems such as heart disease and stroke.³ According to the New York City

“The most interesting classes are when we sampled organically grown fruits. The fruits tasted different from the fruits that I normally eat, and it was through these classes that I finally learned why.”

~ MELCY, 12TH GRADE
HIGH SCHOOL FOR VIOLIN AND DANCE

Students at Bronx International High School teach their classmates about the health impacts of too much sugar. Left: Students at Bronx Regional High School prepare vegetable beds for winter.

Students at Satellite Academy plant wheat and rye seeds.
Department of Health, one in eight New Yorkers is diagnosed with diabetes; 90 percent of these cases are type 2 or adult onset diabetes that can be linked in part to poor eating habits. Perhaps most frightening are the increases in childhood/teen diabetes and obesity. Almost 25 percent of all New York City elementary school students are obese, compared with a national average of 15 percent. In high schools throughout New York State, the percentage of students who are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight is nearly 30 percent. The New York City health community is in agreement that solutions to these problems require a multi-faceted approach that includes improving food access and nutrition education.

- The intermediate and high school based Environmental Education program engages young people in environmental and health related projects.

In 2006, CENYC joined these three long-standing programs to create “Learn it, Grow it, Eat it,” an innovative food/health initiative being piloted at five public high schools in the Morrisania section of the South Bronx. The goal of the project is to encourage the 200 participating high school students to take control of their health through nutrition education and improving food access in their schools and community.

How it Works
Learn it, Grow it, Eat it has in-class and in the garden components. Students learn about healthy eating, where their food comes from, and sample locally grown and/or organic food. They also learn to tend soil and grow vegetables.

In the Classroom
Students develop awareness of healthy and unhealthy foods. The students engage in a dialog about their eating habits and the possible health consequences of a diet high in calories, fat, salt, and sugar. They learn to evaluate the nutritional make-up of meals at favorite fast food restaurants, and learn to decipher food labels such as figuring out how much sugar is in favorite drinks. With this knowledge, students decide on the healthiest options at neighborhood diners. Students explore the benefits of eating lots of fruits and vegetables and cutting down on junk food.

The students also investigate food safety issues such as fruits and vegetables doused with pesticides and contaminated fish. They discuss “food miles”: the energy used and pollution generated by shipping food over thousands of miles. In-class discussions focus on alternatives to the mainstream food distribution system: farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture programs, and food grown by themselves in community gardens.

Throughout, students sample locally grown foods such as apples, berries, purple carrots, cucumbers, and radishes. They make salads and try organic peanut butter without added salt or sugar (“Mmm, tastes like crushed peanuts,” says one student). To spread information about healthy eating, students in turn offer their schoolmates, teachers, and community locally grown fruits and vegetables at events such as health fairs, parent/teacher night and holiday parties.

In the Community Garden
The community garden is where many students make their first contact with gardening and growing food. This past fall, students planted garlic for summer harvest as they prepared vegetable beds at two local community

Council on the Environment of New York City (CENYC) is a privately funded citizens organization in the Office of the Mayor. Formed in 1970, CENYC promotes environmental awareness and solutions to environmental problems. CENYC contributes to the vitality of New York City’s diverse communities, touching the five boroughs and the lives of many thousands of New Yorkers through four programs: Greenmarket farmers markets, Environmental Education, the Greening and Open Space Program, and the Office of Recycling, Outreach and Education. For more information, visit www.cenyc.org or call 212.788.7900.
gardens for spring planting. Students engaged in activities such as weeding, amending soil, planting rye and wheat grass as cover crops, and starting a compost pile. Besides acquiring gardening skills, students learned firsthand about seasonality, poor soil and how to amend it, and invertebrate life in the South Bronx. To help the students make the connection from seed to table, the students have ordered seeds and planned for spring planting with an eye toward including vegetables with the highest nutritional content alongside their favorites.

School-based gardening programs often fail because students leave in June just as the vegetable garden needs the most care. When they return in September, the garden is weed choked or has succumbed to drought. To take advantage of peak growing season, CENYC is offering paid internships to students to help cultivate summer vegetables. In addition to gardening, the interns will publicize farmers markets and the availability of other healthy food in the neighborhood. They will also decide what to do with their harvest: eat it, donate it, and/or sell it.

**Empowered Students**

As Learn it, Grow it, Eat it grows, CENYC hopes to expand the program to other neighborhoods and partner with organizations such as the New York City Department of Health to assist with programs that encourage healthy eating in low income communities. We also plan to work with community-based food justice organizations to make sure residents of the students’ communities are aware of healthy foods and where to find them.

CENYC hopes that the teens that experience Learn it, Grow it, Eat it it will empower themselves to teach their communities about the link between healthy eating and the environment. Often it is the casual comment made by a student that shows a growing awareness of this connection.