

Growing Success,

One Student at a Time:

LAKELAND

MONTESSORI

Middle School

by Ginny Mink



The educational system in America is taking a beating on so many fronts. Undoubtedly there are people who sit on either side of the Common Core Curriculum fence, just as much as there are those who support or belittle homeschooling. Certainly the concept of Montessori and charter schools is a highly debated one as well. While we can't reveal our personal leanings here, we can share with you something awesome that is happening in a Montessori charter school in Polk County. With the help of a local restaurant and some dedicated farmers and agriculturists, Lakeland Montessori Middle School is a shining star in the public education sector, for sure!

We chatted with one of the two teachers there, Anna Clarke. She shared, "Lakeland Montessori Middle School is a first-come, first serve, application charter school serving seventh and eighth grade. I'm a middle school teacher who has terrible gardening skills because I grew up in a different state and I studied marine biology, so I really had to learn a lot. We've been really excited about all the farmers that have helped us out and have taught us a lot. It's been good." What Anna's talking about is an Ag in the Classroom grant in which Lakeland Montessori Middle is the proud recipient. Anna further explained, "We didn't write the grant, it was an organization that we work with a lot called h.e.a.r.t., which is Hunger Education and Resource Training. It's related to Warner University in Lake Wales. They train college students who are interested in becoming missionaries or Peace Corps workers in agriculture and hunger issues. We have done trips with them out to their site in the past and they offered to write this grant. Paul Saucier, the gardener out there, wrote the grant to support them helping us learn about agriculture at our site. So we put the garden in, and we had to ask around for where we could do it and we were very lucky that the Red Door donated the space to do it in and also said that they would like to buy the vegetables and the herbs from us that we produce."

How did this all come to fruition?

Anna clarifies, "Paul Saucier wrote the grant and submitted it, and we were funded. We consulted with a couple of farmers, one is Gil Debagnieu (Go Natural Organics). Gill has a farm in Lakeland and so he consulted with our students. Also, the people who run the horticulture landscape program for the City of Lakeland also consulted with the students. So the students all gathered opinions and ideas.

Each group of four students came up with a plan for their garden and they presented it to Paul and Gil. Paul and Gil gave them feedback and once they had their plants chosen, then they decided as a group which was the best plan; then they installed the garden." That sounds pretty simple but if you're not familiar with the area let us explain: Lakeland Montessori Middle is housed in the Polk Museum of Art, which is super cool in and of itself, but there's not any agricultural land nearby. There are houses and shops surrounding it. So where in the world are these kids growing the garden?

Anna graciously explained, "The garden is extremely narrow. It's a strip of land that is about 20 feet long and about 1 ½ feet wide and then there's another section that's another 20 feet long by about 6 feet wide. So, it's really urban gardening and that means that a lot of people who see it, get really excited about it! There's a lot of lettuce and a lot of herbs and a lot of greens. What's been a challenge for the students is they have to meet with the Red Door about once every eight weeks and find out what plans they have to change the menu, what herbs and vegetables add extra value to the menu that they can charge more for and they have to plan their next planting around those things. They have another meeting Friday to start planning the spring planting. The students have had to learn how to keep the accounting, they've had to learn how to write invoices. They actually invoice the Red Door for things and then they invest the money that they earn back into the garden." Talk about an incredible learning experience for these kids!

What else is great about kids growing gardens?

Anna continued, "They are out there two to three times a week, usually for about 30 minutes at a time and then about every six weeks we spend a full day or two out there installing things. We've been super lucky because the Landscape Department for the City of Lakeland is so over-the-top-amazing! The students have had a tour of Hollis Gardens, that whole park is designed to show all of the agriculture of Florida and all the major crops so that's how the students learned what the different fruits and vegetables look like and what seasons they should be planted in. That's what they learned through those guys. They've come in and consulted with the students and said, 'here's what we know about the soil where you are, but here's what we do and here's the irrigation that we recommend,' and so the students

have made their own choices, but they've got some consulting with that." Anna wanted to make sure that the guys in the Landscape Department for the City know how deeply the students have appreciated their assistance.

There's more to this grant than growing things. Anna elaborated, "Part of our grant also requires that the students learn about the history of agriculture in Florida and we're lucky because we're walking distance to Florida Southern's archives which has a large archive just about the history of agriculture. So, the students each did a research project about what the different farms are that were in Lakeland over the years. They looked at old photos and property maps to determine that. They also looked at the advertising that was going on. They looked at citrus advertising and other agriculture ads. Part of that project was they went to a senior center across the street from us and they interviewed them about what they eat now and what they ate as children and how those things have changed. So that's kind of how we incorporated it into the rest of the curriculum." Apparently the experience was particularly eye opening for one of Anna's students. She said, "One student was really taken aback, it took her a while to warm up to the senior citizen she was talking to because he really, very carefully, explained that his family had often gone through periods when they didn't have much to eat. So, he had helped his family out by fishing and she had been really moved by that. So that was a good moment." Sometimes we need to realize just how well we've got it!

You can hear, in Anna's voice the sheer fact that though this isn't an area in which she has much expertise, it's an enjoyable experience for her and the students she teaches. She concludes, "I think one of the best stories was that the students had been super excited about turning in their first invoice and getting their first check, but what really excited them was when they went and they looked at the menu of the restaurant. They saw that there was a BLT and it said that they had grown that lettuce, it was Montessori Greens. When they saw how much the restaurant was able to charge for that because it was fancier, because it was our lettuce, they were super excited! I think one of the things that has been really fun, as a teacher, is to see how much math the students learned by figuring out how to draw a scale map of the property and then planning out the area required for each different crop in their design proposal, they got a lot out of that."

As an aside Anna revealed, "Part of this is that our students (once a year for a different school business that they run) turn our school into a restaurant and they actually get training from the Red Door on how to be professional, how to show up on time, how to dress professionally, and how to serve everyone graciously. They pick the recipes and they do all the cooking under the supervision of the chefs from the Red Door and then they charge their parents lots of money to come and to eat their dinner and see their play. That's how they raise money for their end of the year field trip. The Montessori philosophy is that in order for students to be healthy, independent adults, they need to start learning economic independence in middle school, so that's why we focus so much on that." If you'd like to know more about Lakeland Montessori Middle you can contact them through their website: <http://lakelandmontessori.com/> or by phone: (863) 413-0003. If you'd like to taste their fresh produce you can do so at the Red Door: <http://reddoor-winemarket.com/> and if you'd like to support h.e.a.r.t. visit: <http://heart-institute.org/>.

