

Planting the Seeds of Stewardship : A Community Garden Project

St. Mary's School, Light of Christ Catholic Schools, North Battleford
Written by Ramona Stillar

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

- Mark 4:30-32 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Nationally, 20% of families live below the low income marker (poverty line). This number is a staggering 33% in North Battleford according to 2016 census data. Furthermore, the 2012 Canadian Community Health Survey indicates that among off-reserve First Nations people 12 years and older, 22% lived in households that experienced food insecurity, three times the proportion of non-Aboriginal people. Additionally, First Nations people, were more likely to report being diagnosed with diabetes than non-Aboriginal people. Health complications associated with food insecurity can range from malnutrition to obesity. Although it may seem contradictory, people who experience food insecurity are more likely to be obese. One possible reason is that people with lower incomes may have less access to affordable healthy food. Instead, they consume low-cost, high calorie foods. Low-income families face many obstacles to consuming a nutritious diet, including limited access to fresh produce. The St. Mary Community School garden aims to change this!

We are called to nourish our time, talent, and treasure. At St. Mary's School, where 93% of our student population is First Nations or Métis, we greatly value and emphasize the need to foster healthy physical, mental, social, intellectual, and spiritual development for students and staff. Furthermore, we believe that community connectedness through healthy relationships with parents and community members leads to greater engagement, participation, knowledge and opportunity to gain new perspectives for the benefit of the entire community. Healthier students learn better and better educated students are healthier. Our students are involved in the construction and maintenance of the garden space, the resulting product selection and cultivation, and meal preparation for students in the school. Their enthusiasm and passion for growing their own food is ever increasingly evident. Growing food is not only a noble endeavour, it also leads to greater overall health, better understanding and problem solving, and interest in food sustainability, agricultural practices, and a commitment to environmental sustainability. Since 2006, the Aboriginal population has grown by 42.5% — more than four times the growth rate of the non-Aboriginal population over the same period. According to population projections, the number of Aboriginal people will continue to grow quickly. In the next two decades, the Aboriginal population is likely to exceed 2.5 million persons with proportionally more children and youth and fewer seniors. Traditional teachings and elder knowledge risk being lost. The St. Mary's School community garden demonstrates that students who think critically, ask questions, manipulate, plan, sort, test, and investigate materials develop higher literacy skills, improved decision making, and the ability to make more informed choices. Growing food demonstrates that First Nations teachings are not lost, they are relevant now and will be in the future too as we work and learn to cherish our role as stewards of the earth. Just like the mustard seed, this project will continue to grow, thrive, and create strong healthy youth who invest in themselves and their community.

