

# GARDENING

▼ CONTINUED FROM C1

learn this?"

"There's so many kids for whom existing structures are not working," he said. "There's a lot of reasons for that, but one of them is the schools are not doing everything they could do."

The Vegetable Project is Stoneman's way of making up for what's lacking in a traditional school day by providing tactile experiences for kids. At Myers, Stoneman and a team of volunteers ushered students through the steps to make a greenhouse from a milk jug. First, they cut the jugs in half and punctured the top half with a power drill — the first time many of the kids used a power tool — then they filled the bottom of the jug with potting soil, planted seeds and watered them. The last step is to tape the top back on and write their names on it before the jugs are moved outside.

"Handling the tiny seeds makes them slow down and be deliberate," said Malaysia Hector, a University at Albany student and Vegetable Project volunteer. "The seed comes packed with everything it needs for life."

Stoneman and his volunteers guided 125 Myers students in making a milk jug greenhouse in March, and by the time they're done in early April, more than 500 children in the district will have made one planted with beans or broccoli, herbs or other cold-tolerant vegetables. He has ambitions beyond one-day projects and hopes to expand the garden at Myers into an outdoor learning center with a four-season greenhouse, an outdoor classroom, an orchard and more. The lessons a garden teaches include responsibility —



Photos by Paul Buckowski / Times Union



Eighth grader Wesley Peden, 13, right, sprays water on seeds he had just placed inside a greenhouse made out of a milk jug at Stephen and Harriet Myers Middle School on March 7. At left, a student holds seeds for peas.

tending to garden as it grows — a process embedded with lessons about science; entrepreneurship, when students have a chance to sell their produce, set a fair price and interact with customers; and a loftier goal: stewardship of the land, air and water, necessary for thriving vegetables — and a healthy planet.

Stoneman said not all the educators he's met through the years have embraced the concept, but he found enthusiastic partners in Larry Drew, who teaches family and consumer science at Myers, and school Principal Bill Rivers, who said it's great to see kids doing any hands-on learning.

Drew started a farm-to-table program last year, when his students use vegetables harvested from the school garden to make a meal. It's hard to know the long-term impact of introducing students to gardening, but in the short term, he sees a large percentage who become deeply engaged, focused and social as they interact with volunteers.

Drew's goal is for his

students to enjoy the process of gardening and understand you can plant a seed and six weeks later be eating pea shoots. There is a broad mixture of students at the school, Drew said. Some help at home with grocery shopping and cooking meals, some never set foot in a kitchen. Some live in tumultuous homes. All were hurt by months of being sequestered in their rooms during the pandemic, when learning was attempted through a screen.

"I'd like in the long run for them to think about where their food is coming from and what they're putting into their bodies," Drew said. "There are farms all around Albany and farmers markets. I want them to know there's good, fresh food available if you make some effort to find it. I hope they take that knowledge home and share it with their parents."

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