

Tenino Uses ELG Funds to Expand Access to Outdoor Learning

by Heidi Smith

On a recent spring day, Caitlin Craig-Mickel's students gathered around a chain link fence surrounding the school garden, their noses pressed against the metal so they wouldn't miss a thing. The kids were only slightly more enthusiastic than the assembled Tenino Elementary School maintenance staff. In classrooms facing the garden, other teachers had a hard time keeping their students on task because everyone wanted to look out the window.

The source of their excitement? A concrete slab.

Their passion was not so much for the rectangular patch of cement in itself but for what it represented: the beginning of a new outdoor learning space. Through an Environmental Literacy Grant from the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), the space will allow Tenino Elementary School staff and students to do lessons outdoors in conjunction with the school garden, regardless of the weather or time of year. The district will provide further funding to cover the slab, in addition to monies provided by the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and Whole Kids Foundation.

Even without a cover, the slab has had an impact, Craig-Mickel notes. "More classes come outside to eat now," she says. "Suddenly more people are outdoors for reading time."

The outdoor learning space will have multiple benefits for both students and teachers. Craig-Mickel began the school garden as a club activity six years ago and it has remained as such until now. "The way clubs work is that you need someone to pick you up after school, and for a lot of kids that's not an option," she explains. "From an equity standpoint, this allows us to widen access to the garden for all students."



The outdoor learning space creates access for all students to get involved in the school garden.



Teacher Caitlin Craig-Mickel has noticed more classes spending time outdoors since construction on the outdoor learning space began.

Many of the students already have a knowledge base about gardens from their families. “So much can be taught by seeing the whole growing cycle,” says Craig-Nickel. “Kids like the opportunity to do science in a way that’s really hands-on and moving away from reading a textbook. There’s so much outdoor learning that relates to science standards and is a lot more engaging for kids.”

Nine-year-old Paxton Frank enjoys watering the garden. “I’ve learned plants take time to grow and some plants need lots of water and some don’t,” he explains. “When we get the cover, I hope that we can have a big space to enjoy being in the sun and do science lessons outside. ”

His classmate Christian Soberanis appreciates other factors. “The garden is good for the environment and it saves money when we can take home food from it,” he says.

For teachers, the outdoor learning space expands the possibilities of how they can teach science. Because Craig-Mickel began the garden, many have tended to see it as ‘her’ garden and felt they needed to ask permission to use the space, she says. Now that’s changing.

“There are fewer barriers to getting kids outside for learning,” she maintains. “So much of science is messy, and the outdoor learning space opens up room for a lot more messy projects. This increases which options people are willing to look at in terms of what kinds of science kids are doing.”

The Tenino School District has a robust FFA program and installed gardens at the primary school several years ago. “Our district has prioritized and invested in opportunities for outdoor learning,” says Craig Mickel. “Being able to have a space like this for outdoor lessons changes them from being ancillary or extracurricular to being something that’s part of core learning for all kids.”