

SUPERINTENDENT'S BRIEF

Together, We are the Champions for Children in Poughkeepsie City School District

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Growing garden program teaches ELC students

After each student took a turn digging dirt and making space in the planter, Serena Domingues lifted up the evergreen shrub that would go there. Using a trowel, she chipped away at the dense clump of roots at the plant's base. "We do this because the roots are congested," she explained to the Early Learning Center kindergarteners surrounding her. "We want the roots to be open to breathe."

Opening channels for the students to plant their own roots in green space is what the outdoor education program at the Early Learning Center has been all about. Though the program is wrapping up for another academic year, school and community officials have plans in place for the school's garden, too, to continue to grow.

The students on Tuesday were treated to a year-ending party at City Hall in which they planted various shrubs and flowers in the planters that line the walkway on its northeast corner, participated in art projects, took part in drum sessions and enjoyed healthy snacks.

Through the ELC Learning Garden, the students learn not only about where food comes from and the differences between fresh and processed foods but also the responsibility of taking care of something that requires attention and maintenance.

Though the garden is a year-round fixture at the school, the Environmental Stewardship Program itself, which began last year, stretches six weeks in the spring. It's administered by Domingues, founder of [Nature's](#)

[Impact](#), and Carrie Decker, founder of [Crazy Over Art On Tour](#). Every Wednesday the children join Domingues in the garden to plant, weed and learn about sustainability, and take part in nature-themed arts and crafts with Decker. Such interconnectivity, be it between gardening and art, or within the different plants and elements of a garden ecosystem, is a key to the program, Domingues said. "It's not just about us. It's about the birds, the bees, the pollinators," she said. "I like to incorporate that into the program so they understand it's not just about feeding us, it's about feeding everything."

Roughly 35 students took part in the program this year. Domingues said some of the kids have shown "pure joy picking weeds," as the garden helps them "enjoy simple pleasures and simple acts" of maintenance and care. She acknowledged many children in the city may not have access to land to grow their own food.



Students work with Serena Domingues in the ELC Learning Garden during the weekly environmental program.



Students plant along a City Hall walkway on Tuesday.

"Our goal is to make sure that we're providing these experiences so they can get their hands dirty and learn this is where your food comes from," she said. "You can grow your own food, you don't have to buy it at the store."

Outside of the six-week program, teachers can bring students out to work in the garden, and teachers and facilities staff have taken the lead maintaining it. Domingues has elevated the existing space and provided a vision for what it can become. Early Learning Center Principal Nadine Dargan said the garden exposes students to healthy eating as "a way of life." Earlier this month the students enjoyed a salad with a strawberry vinaigrette, with ingredients picked from the garden.

"The garden gives them a sense of responsibility; this is our garden, it's at our school, we get to go out and we get to help and we get to plant and then we get to eat what comes out of our garden," she said.

The environmental program is made possible through several funding sources, including a youth grant from the city. Domingues and Dargan plan to use some of that funding to grow the space. In the fall they plan to install a small shed, a seating space with a pergola and a pollinator garden to build on the pollinators in its existing garden. Future additions may include fruit trees.

"I'm excited," Dargan said, noting they aim to build on more features "every year. As long as the funding is there, we'll make it happen."

Domingues also is looking for community members – preferably those with students in the school who can bring the kids along – who would volunteer to tend to the garden over the summer and outside of school hours in return for taking home some of the produce. Those interested can contact her at

Serena@naturesimpact.org.

At City Hall, in addition to beautifying the planters, the children worked on crafts with Decker that included painting garden-themed plaster stepping stones. The children were given a choice to keep them or bring them back to the school to be installed at the garden. Mayor Yvonne Flowers joined them for some of the activities, including drumming with BabaKazi Oliver. "We think it is so fitting for the city to collaborate with these organizations in such a hands-on way that benefits and teaches our youth," Flowers said. "Providing space on the public grounds of City Hall is a perfect way to foster the creativity of our youth and to connect them to their government."

Domingues hopes the children translate the lessons they learn in the garden to the community.

"Hopefully when they see a piece of trash on the ground," she said, "they may say, 'Oh, let me pick that up and throw it away because I want to make my city beautiful and I want to take care of the space.'"



Nature-themed learning through books, above, and arts and crafts are a part of the weekly program. At City Hall, below, the students painted stepping stones and on clay.



Low-cost produce available

The Poughkeepsie Farm Project is making fresh, local vegetables available at free or reduced cost to qualified low-income city residents. Members of the project's sponsored share program will be able to pick up vegetables once a week for 23 weeks from June to November at either 50-percent the cost of a regular CSA share or on a pay-what-you-can plan, depending on a household's qualification level, including those with Supplemental Nutrition Assistant Program, or SNAP, benefits.

[Apply to join the program online](#). For information, contact Maddy at helloCSA@farmproject.org, call 845-516-1100, visit pfpfarmstore.com/pages/accessibility or visit Sun River Health at 75 Washington St. on Fridays from 1 to 3 p.m.

Senior Walk celebration sets example for students

Eleven years ago, Maritza Juarez stood outside her classroom at Krieger Elementary School, cheering on a class of graduates as they paraded the halls. That's what she thought about as she wore a cap and gown and walked through hallways lined with students making noise in honor of her Class of 2024.

"I was like them," she said. "I was outside clapping for my brother and everyone. I realized, now they're clapping for me." More than 100 of Poughkeepsie High School's outgoing seniors toured the school district in their blue graduation regalia Thursday, walking through each building, beginning with the Early Learning Center and including the Columbus School Administration building and a stop at City Hall. At each school, they were greeted by enthusiastic students looking to them as role models.

Mahalia Samuels, a University of Hartford-bound senior, said the experience was "overwhelming." Visiting her elementary school, Clinton, was a highlight.

"All the kids were cheering us on, high-fiving us, giving us stickers," she said. "It was just so heart-warming to see all the students really supporting us."

After the tour, the seniors returned to the high school, where they were likewise greeted by their peers and paraded the halls. They then enjoyed a barbecue on the artificial turf field.

"Everyone was signing shirts, yearbooks, some were crying," said Juarez, who will attend Marist College in the fall. "We were having a water fight, it was so fun. The music was loud, the food was good."

After the school-organized events, Juarez said, much of the group stayed together and walked to the riverfront, where they watched the sunset.

While the experience was rewarding for the graduates, it also sent a message to the younger Pioneers.

During the morning announcements at the Early Learning Center, Principal Nadine Dargan instructed the students to "imagine yourself in 12 years – a long time, but it goes fast. Imagine yourself in your cap and gown when you're going to march for your high school graduation. We want you to be so excited."

Dargan's staff passed out to each student noisemakers like maracas, rhythm sticks and tambourines to add to the cacophony as the graduates marched and "Pomp and Circumstance" played overhead.



While the Senior Walk was an exciting experience for the seniors, the students at places like the Early Learning Center cheered them on as role models.



Graduation/moving up ceremony calendar

(At Poughkeepsie Middle School unless otherwise noted)

Kindergarten: June 17, 9 a.m., noon;
June 18, 9 a.m.

Morse Fifth Grade: June 20, 9 a.m.

PMS Eighth Grade: June 20, 4 p.m.

Clinton Fifth Grade: June 21, 9 a.m.

Krieger Fifth Grade:

June 21, 9 a.m. at Krieger

Warring Fifth Grade:

June 21, 9 a.m. at Warring

Pre-K: June 21, 9 a.m. at the Early Learning Center

High School Graduation:

June 26, 6 p.m. at PHS



Students lined the halls of each district building to cheer on the graduating seniors Thursday.

"At this age, we want them to understand that this is just the beginning of my journey and every year the goal is graduation from high school," Dargan said. "It starts now, letting them know they're going to graduate. Look forward to your cap and gown. We want them to be college and career ready and the only way that's going to happen is by planting that seed now."

After the graduates left the school, the teachers engaged the young learners in conversation. "'How did that make you feel? Are you excited? What do you think you want to do when you grow up?'" Dargan said. "We want them to be prepared for the 'What's next?' in their lives."

The parade was organized by Special Education Department Chair Gayle Gerrard-Lewin, and 12th grade Assistant Principal Joseph Mazzetti, Executive Director of School Engagement Da'Ron Wilson, social studies teacher Dr. Sankung Susso, and College Readiness and Workforce Education Counselor Kelly Semexant were among those accompanying the seniors. "They were chanting 'Class of '24! Go PHS!'" Semexant recalled of the elementary students. "The kids were looking at the seniors like superstars."

"They were so energetic," Juarez said of the younger Pioneers. "I hope to see them graduate, too."

Rosser to discuss district's next strategic plan

As the Poughkeepsie City School District enters the final year of its 5-Year Strategic Plan, Dr. Eric Jay Rosser, superintendent of schools, will be outlining the process for developing a plan that will frame the district's strategic focus and activity for the next five years, July 2025 to June 2030.

Upon his arrival in 2019, Rosser embarked on a multifaceted process of engaging the school and community in what it envisioned a high-quality educational experience should be for district students. The process resulted in the development of a strategy to improve student outcomes.

"I'm pleased with what we have accomplished in the past five years working together collaboratively to meet the needs of our students. We have achieved some very significant milestones that serve as the foundation for our continued upward trajectory. Over the next several months and entering into the new school year, I am excited to hear from our school and community stakeholders on what we envision the next five years to look like for the Poughkeepsie City School District," shared Rosser.

Join Rosser, tomorrow, June 15 at 9 a.m. at Poughkeepsie Middle School, 55 College Ave., to hear about the process that will be employed to collect feedback from the students, parents, staff and the community in the drafting of the district's 2025-2030 Strategic Plan. Visit the district website to view [the 2020-2024 Strategic Plan](#) or the district's [2020-2024 Milestone Achievements](#).



Dr. Eric Jay Rosser

Other newsletters to keep you informed:

Poughkeepsie City School District publishes a variety of newsletters throughout the year. Here are the available newsletters now: [Curriculum & Instruction Weekly](#), June 14, 2024; [College Readiness and Workforce Education](#), May 2024; [Mental Health in the Spotlight](#), May 2024; [Mental Health & Wellness](#), May 2024.

Upcoming events

- **June 15:** Superintendent Fireside Chat: Topic 2025 – 2030 Strategic Plan Outline: 9 a.m. at Poughkeepsie Middle School, 55 College Ave.
- **June 18:** Women's Empowerment Chat with Grace Smith House speaker: 1:30 p.m. at the Parent Empowerment Center, 55 College Ave.
- **June 18:** School Board regular meeting: 6:30 p.m. at the Columbus Building, 18 South Perry St.
- **June 19:** Juneteenth: All schools and district offices will be closed.