

## **SAGE SCHOOL GARDEN INITIATIVE:**

### **THE ORGANIZATION and MISSION**

SAGE (Schools Are Gardening in Evanston) is a project of Keep Evanston Beautiful (KEB) and is the logical outgrowth of the school garden initiative begun about nine years ago by then Board Member and retired teacher, Lynn Hyndman. Initially KEB lent financial support to this project in the form of mini-grants funded by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency for EarthBoxes. Several schools established rudimentary gardens but the recent explosion of interest has led to a new level of need for supportive services.

SAGE became the formal descriptor of the school garden initiative in early 2009 when a small group of parents, teachers, and concerned Evanstonians gathered on a frosty January evening to discuss responses to the nationwide health and obesity crisis. The potential of an edible school garden as the ultimate teaching tool integrating nutrition and wellness education across core curriculum areas has driven the school garden initiative ever since that meeting.

### **SAGE MEETS IMPORTANT NEEDS COMPREHENSIVELY**

The importance of good nutrition to good health is extensively documented. Recent research is accumulating to show the importance of sound nutrition to the ability to learn in the classroom and to success in later life. Because healthy eating habits are formed in the early years, it is critical to provide children with ample opportunity to taste and celebrate fresh, seasonal foods in the midst of the peer and family gatherings that the school gardens foster. At SAGE we believe we are in a unique position to promote necessary changes in the culture around food by continued development of and support for Evanston's school gardens, particularly those which serve children in the elementary grades.

Presently, nutrition and wellness education in District 65 schools is covered by the physical education curriculum, although the district appears to have de-prioritized wellness education due to it not being a required topic at the national and state core standards levels. And while each school is required by the district to have a Wellness Committee, there is great variance from school to school in activity and impact. The programs SAGE delivers are linked to core curriculum taught in the classroom and provide the hands on, trial and error, place-based learning modality that amplifies learning objectives. Children are engaged in the cooperative adventure of planting, growing, harvesting, and tasting fresh foods essential to their health while at the same time learning about where their food comes from, experiencing the benefits of exercise in the fresh air, teamwork, and connecting abstract ideas from the classroom to tangible activities in the garden.

We are not aware of other community assets designed to deliver programs to promote positive changes in nutrition and wellness status as comprehensively as SAGE. That the program has traction is evidenced by the growth over the past three years in the number and quality of school gardens created since 2009. In District 65 alone 14 of 16 schools now have gardens, and many private, parochial, and nursery schools have joined the movement.

### **GOALS AND ACTIVITIES**

SAGE is dedicated to the overarching goal of promoting healthy life skills and community building for our children by cultivating nutrition and environmental awareness through garden-based learning. Structurally, SAGE is comprised of its constituent school gardens and its administrative arm, the SAGE Steering Committee.

Each school is responsible for initiating development of its own garden which is then most often managed by a Garden Coordinator – typically a parent, but sometimes a teacher. The SAGE Steering Committee, a group of seven professionals with diverse experience and skill sets, is charged with meeting the challenge of supporting development and implementation of garden-based educational programming and sustaining necessary school garden leadership and infrastructure management. Members of the SAGE Steering Committee offer onsite consultation as needed with individual schools to advise on garden planning and development as well as to trouble shoot.

To promote garden program sustainability the SAGE Steering Committee holds monthly conversations – interactional forums for sharing teaching tools, successful garden lessons, problem solving, and best practices. We sponsor an electronic message board for instant communication; we offer a cool season crop seedling program; we have provided soil testing and annual mini-grants for infrastructure and tools.

The Steering Committee liaises with District 65 administration on the integration of garden-based learning into the District Core Curriculum, as exemplified by the June 2012 accredited pilot Teacher Training Workshop in Place-Based Education and participation in the District 65 Summer Curriculum Project on Place-Based Education.

### **GRANT ASSISTANCE FOR SAGE DEVELOPMENT**

With the rapid expansion of school gardens, SAGE's ability to deliver program support on a strictly volunteer basis is compromisingly stretched. Our greatest immediate and long-term challenge is to ensure sustainability. Vacancies created when key volunteers move on leaves gardens vulnerable to decline and failure. SAGE involvement is critical to managing that flux through monitoring, development oversight, succession planning, volunteer cultivation, and building community partnerships.

SAGE is poised to take a quantum organizational leap. There is demand for a follow-up to our Teacher's Workshop. We are planning a similar experience to train prospective volunteers to assist with garden lessons. We have an opportunity to collaborate with the summer program offered at the Ecology Center to pilot a gardening module in one or more camp sessions. We are in a very early stage of creating program evaluation measures to formally assess program impact. We believe Evanston has an opportunity to become the model for a school garden program having community-wide impact and hope to document our work in the literature on place-based education.

To meet the opportunities this ambitious agenda presents, we seek assistance from a root-2-fruit Grant to partially fund a part-time, salaried SAGE Program Director. This augmented capacity would permit SAGE to accelerate progress in achieving our measureable goals of garden sustainability, full classroom participation in garden lessons, garden leadership training, and outreach to the community to connect food, health, and the environment.

### **INCREMENTAL GROWTH OVER THREE YEARS**

We anticipate that root-2-fruit Grant support for several years will permit taking our organization to a more structured level of functioning. With assistance to institute ordered business practices, several of our Steering Committee members will have time to put a formal fundraising program in place. Prior success suggests that this area of organizational development will prove fruitful when we are able to turn some operations over to designated staff. Recognizing that individual donors are key to operational funding, we plan an initial campaign targeting Evanston school graduates through a mass mailing campaign, utilization of written and video informational and marketing materials now being developed, and cultivation of personal relationships with prospective individual donors with history of or potential for interest in securing the future of SAGE. Results of our efforts to date have brought support from both local individuals and donors as remotely located as California and Arizona, encouraging us to anticipate incremental growth in donations as we are able to increase our fundraising activity. At the same time we plan increased attention to funding from additional grant opportunities.

### **OTHER FUNDERS**

A Whole Foods 5% Day sponsored to benefit SAGE set a record, and we trust we will be able to have their periodic support again. The stunning success of the 2012 KEB Annual Garden Walk suggests the possibility SAGE will benefit from the proceeds of future Garden Walks. We also anticipate that creating a benefit unique to SAGE will be important, and we are considering the option of charging fees for future workshops. SAGE is ready to grow!