

# 'Growing like a weed'

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DEERING — This year, students at Dawson-Bryant Elementary School have been getting a hands on learning experience from a new greenhouse, installed in the school's cafeteria at the beginning of the school year. And, when principal Monica Mahlmeister describes the project as "growing like a weed," she is referring to the enthusiasm of the students and the expansion of the activities, which have produced usable crops for the school.



The project is headed up by school counselor Audra Deere, who said the greenhouse was provided to the school through Heroic Game Day, an online learning game that students in Lawrence County schools and others across the state and nation take part in.

"A lot of the game has different skills that kids go through," Deere said. "There are different topics, like civics, communication, leadership and entrepreneurship. A lot of things go into the game and kids will complete missions. They're playing it like a game, but learning."

Deere said, this year, there was a gardening portion to the game. "It's virtual learning," she said. "They use points they earned to purchase seeds. Then, they go and plant seeds in virtual garden. Each takes a certain amount of time to harvest. They have to choose from the amount of coins they have for how many seeds they can purchase. Once they harvest the seeds, they can sell them for profit. And, so there is a math component in that."



Deere said, this year, Heroic Game Day wanted to extend the gardening to real life learning and schools were provided with a greenhouse.

"They brought the greenhouse and set it up," she said. "I let them take what seeds they want to plant. Some, we do in grow bags, under grow lights. Some, we started them in foam pods and transfer to the hydroponic grow tower."

"And we've seen a difference in grow rates between them," Deere said. "That's been kind of interesting for kids to see the difference how fast or slow they will grow."

She said the school's first successful planting was butterhead lettuce, done in two locations.

"And we were able to harvest that lettuce," she said. "Our cafeteria workers took the lettuce we harvested and they created a salad for the kids. They got to eat what they grew. That was fun for them."

Deere said the project has brought in the involvement of faculty and staff, with Dean Palmer, the school's resource officer, and custodian Harold Wiley, building a trellis for plants.

"We want to plant an herb garden and our cafeteria supervisor will use herbs we have grown to use for recipes





for cafeteria,” she said. “The cafeteria workers have all jumped on board. Everybody is so excited, and the first thing in the morning is to see what the greenhouse is doing.”

Deere said the students have also planted peppers and squash, but growing tomatoes gave them a problem-solving experience. “They were growing and looked super healthy, but the flowering buds died off,” she said.

After research, they discovered two issues — first, that the plants needed more light, which was remedied by purchasing an additional light. And, second, that the plants were not pollinating because they were not outside, where bees and insects could get to them.

Deere said she got an idea for a fix from a teacher in Chesapeake, which also has a Heroic Game Day greenhouse.

“The kids there were pollinating themselves with a paintbrush,” she said. “So, I told them, ‘we’re going to be like little bees and pollinate them ourselves.’” She said the entire process has been “a learning experience.” “For me and for our kids,” she said. “Everybody is collaborating together and problem solving together, because we’ve never done it before.”

She said the students are involved in all aspects of the process, pointing to fourth grade students who test the water in the greenhouse for pH levels. “They know exactly what to do,” she said. “They fill up with water and put drops in see in to see what they need. And there’s a chemical they put in. They do it all.”

Going forward, Deere said an additional greenhouse is set to arrive at the school in coming days. She said plans are for students to continue growing tomatoes and take the plants home. She said they also plan to grow pansies to fill the planters outside the school.

Deere said the benefits of Heroic Game Day can be seen in studies done with other schools in the county, who have seen reading and science scores increase as a result of the game.

“What I think is really cool is that kids are playing the game on the computer and having fun with it, but, also, in doing the greenhouse, they’re getting real life learning. They are learning skills they can use outside school. They can go home and teach their parents what they have learned.”



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