Denver Public Schools Learning Landscapes bond project expands to include Urban Farm Pilot Program

Innovative program transforms urban schoolyards into viable agricultural land serving the school and local community.

On April 30th @ 3pm McGlone elementary will have a very special kind of ground breaking ceremony. Not only are they getting a renovated schoolyard called learning landscapes as part of the DPS bond program but they are also getting a 2 acre urban farm! Denver Public Schools in partnership with Colorado Organic Producers Association (COPA) and Sprout City Farms (SCF) are working together to launch its pilot urban agriculture program at McGlone elementary. During the past 10 months Learning Landscapes, a program of the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado Denver—and a partnership project with Denver Public Schools - and Colorado Organic Producers Association (COPA), the voice of organic agriculture in Colorado, has been working in partnership with Denver Public Schools (DPS) to develop a unique small-scale farming program that develops excess DPS land into production urban farms that:

- Reduces water use and DPS maintenance,
- Provides locally grown organic foods through community-based distribution methods
- Provides a venue for urban farming education
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McGlone is one of two schools that are being considered for the pilot.

A part of COPA’s mission is to preserve land for organic agriculture and to support and build new farmers. The LL project is a “perfect storm” for creating a one-of-a-kind effort in Denver and perhaps in the nation. COPA developed a selection process for the DPS farmers and will mentor them through their first couple of years of farming and help them with all aspects of production agriculture, including growing, business aspects, marketing, and certification. Connecting farmers to each other and the community is another part of COPA’s mission that makes it a natural fit to work in partnership on this exciting venture.

Sprout City Farms, an urban agriculture non-profit based in the city of Denver has been recommended by COPA and are currently working with the district to finalize the details of the pilot program. The produce grown at the schools will be sold both to the school cafeterias and at farmers markets. SCF plans to collaborate with groups like Slow Food Denver and Denver Urban Gardens on educational programming to be carried out at the McGlone. SCF aims to build the infrastructure for these sites over the course of 2010 in preparation for the 2011 growing season.
McG lone which will also have a school vegetable garden as part of their learning landscapes. Learning Landscapes are more than playgrounds. Not only do they encompass play equipment, but the landscapes also provide natural habitat areas to rejuvenate entire school campuses, having a dramatic effect on children and community behavioral patterns. Some of the Learning Landscapes which include vegetable gardens also have experienced significant increases in children’s positive attitudes toward fresh fruits and vegetables,” added Brink.

As an added boast to the urban agriculture movement DPS is committing funds from a focus Kellog grant with DPS food services to install outdoor learning labs or greenhouses. The greenhouses will extend the growing season for children who will be able to sell their produce to their cafeteria as part of the school lunch and a new DPS Garden to Cafeteria initiative.