

GROWING SMILES AT THE NEW VANGARDEN

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Pennsylvania's Vanguard School Plants Seeds of Joy and Independence

BY JAN UEBELHERR



For a student and his speech therapist at the Vanguard School, the VanGarden is a natural extension of the classroom.



Students germinate seeds indoors before transferring them to the outdoor VanGarden.

A child puts a seed into a peat pot, waters it and, in time, sees it sprout. One spring day, the child crouches in a garden and puts it into the earth. A smile blossoms on the child's face. "It's the surprise that this wee little piece of something that I put in the soil actually did grow. Sheer joy – but in such a young face, and a face that sometimes doesn't smile a lot," says Dr. Grace Fornicola, executive director of Valley Forge Educational Services (VFES).

The scene played out repeatedly in the new VanGarden at the Vanguard School, a private school run by VFES in Chester County, Pennsylvania. It serves students age 4 to 21 with autism, blending academic, social, and career skills with the goal of independence.

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– Dr. Grace Fornicola,
Executive Director, VFES

Working together, taking on responsibility – the school saw these positive changes and more take root in their students as they worked in the campus garden.

In December 2013, with a grant from the Subaru of America Foundation, the VanGarden took shape. Industrial arts students cleared space behind a maintenance building, erected a fence, and built six raised 8-by-4-foot beds. Fornicola recalls "the sweet grins" as they worked. "It glows through their face," she says.

Indoors, younger students planted seeds. In May of 2014, plants went into beds.

By June 2014, students picked their first crops – lettuce and cucumbers. There was on-the-spot nibbling. But that happy harvest wasn't the end



for the VanGarden. Culinary arts students used produce for lunches. On "Taste it Tuesday," students sampled garden-grown gazpacho and salsa – a big deal for these kids, who sometimes can be picky eaters. "To get them to try raw tomatoes or cucumbers – the experience to 'give it a try' is a tremendous step forward in their development," Fornicola says.

In January 2015, VFES received a grant from the Subaru of America Foundation toward another wellness initiative – a planned fitness trail.

For now, the VanGarden continues to help grow and sustain the students at Vanguard School.

"It's not fleeting for these kids," Fornicola notes. "They'll retain that feeling of accomplishment. It helps them to know that the garden was a place of success for them." ■

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