**Blog responses to “School Gardeners Strike Back”** (which is a refutation of “Cultivating Failure”)

**Race issues, research**

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| *mogey* [1 year ago](http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33570/#comment-35812682) |

Is this idea that these programs are insulting to poor people and unwanted except by rich white liberals actually based on real stories that Flanagan has heard? I would think that if it was, we would have seen a reference to these real stories in the article. The article would not have started with "imagine you are a poor Mexican immigrant going to MLK" but rather would have, like so many articles, introduced us to an actual real life poor Mexican immigrant who actually does feel that the edible schoolyard is patronizing.

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|  | *akkizza* [1 year ago](http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33570/#comment-35812690) [in reply to mogey](http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33570/#comment-35812682) |

From the very beginning of this article, I was astonished at how poorly researched it was. The two most basic things that Flanagan needed to do to give her article any credibility whatsoever, were to visit and observe a school garden program and to talk to real Latino families that include farmworkers (not just the mythical ones in her head).

My son attends a public elementary school in Berkeley with a school garden. Her basic description of what the kids are doing during this program was wildly, weirdly inaccurate.

Flanagan doesn't even touch on "place based education," and the research that supports that kind of learning. Instead, she scorns the goals and methods of the school garden program by making fun of hifalutin-sounding menu items at Chez Panisse.

The nasty tone she reserves for Alice Waters for being a white, elitist woman is quite strange--coming from Flanagan, who is pretty much the archetypal white elitist woman. On a related note, Waters is simply the most visible figurehead of the school garden program, which is actually the brainchild and vision of many, many people, most of whom are not affiliated with an upscale restaurant.

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| *Andy* [1 year ago](http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33570/#comment-35812684) |

Caitlin Flanagan's assertion that it is somehow degrading for Latino children to come to this country and be forced to farm at school shows inadequate research, if not a lack of knowledge about the realities of what's happening in too many schools. Flanagan believes growing vegetables at school delays assimilation and stunts the education of Latino students. That's far removed from the truth. As one who has spent time in schools with Latino children who are new or relatively new immigrants, I'd say the biggest problem they face is a sense of alienation. If these schoolkids are familiar with planting and growing vegetables and can use that as a link to other school subjects, that could help boost confidence - and help make connections both social and educational. There is the potential that working in a schoolyard garden could serve to BETTER educate and assimilate these kids. And it possibly could keep them from doing the kinds of destructive things people who feel that horrible sense of alienation too often do. It's only another potential benefit from Alice Waters' Edible Schoolyard program.

Corby Kummer's follow-up to Ms. Flanagan's ill-informed report is welcome, well-thought-out and offers smart commentary from those in a position to know. Many thanks to him for taking the time to write something both terse and terrific.

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| **Thorough rhetorical analysis, especially questioning the Class/Race pathos angle**  *Kurt Michael Friese* [1 year ago](http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33570/#comment-35812708) |

In the latest edition of The Atlantic magazine, Caitlin Flanagan has written a surprisingly harsh critique of the popular and growing movement to include gardens in our public schools. In a nutshell, she states that pursuing this activity over and above the three R’s will turn our children into illiterate sharecroppers. Right from the start, though, she gets it wrong.

She has the reader picture the son of undocumented migrant workers entering his first day at Martin Luther King Middle School in Berkeley, home of the well-known Edible Schoolyard project, “where he stoops under the hot sun and begins to pick lettuce.” Her callous disrespect for labor only begins there, but the real problem with her argument lies in her stubborn refusal to accept that a good idea may have sprouted from an ideology other than her own. She goes so far as to describe it as:

“…A vacuous if well-meaning ideology that is responsible for robbing an increasing number of American schoolchildren of hours they might otherwise have spent reading important books or learning higher math (attaining the cultural achievements, in other words, that have lifted uncounted generations of human beings out of the desperate daily scrabble to wrest sustenance from dirt)”

Ms. Flanagan has chosen to ignore the core purposes of these gardens, only one of which happens to be cultivating a respect for hard work, and only one other of which is a healthy respect for real food. While she notes that the work of the garden has migrated into each of the classrooms, she ignores the obvious point that this demonstrates: **There is nothing taught in schools that cannot be learned in a garden. Math and science to be sure, but also history, civics, logic, art, literature, music, and the birds and the bees both literally and figuratively. Beyond that though, in a garden a student learns responsibility, teamwork, citizenship, sustainability, and respect for nature, for others, and for themselves.**

The disdain for the left-of-center viewpoints of those who started the Edible Schoolyard is evidenced in her description of Chez Panisse, the restaurant of Edible Schoolyard’s founder Alice Waters, as “an eatery where the right-on, ‘yes we can,’ ACORN-loving, public-option-supporting man or woman of the people can tuck into a nice table d’hôte menu of scallops, guinea hen, and tarte tatin for a modest 95 clams—wine, tax, and oppressively sanctimonious and relentlessly conversation-busting service not included.” **Flanagan’s attempt at snob-bashing populism and appeal toward the sensitivities of those on the right is misplaced, however, because these school garden ideas, while begun in this particular case by those with left-leaning tendencies, actually hold appeal across the political spectrum. They not only encompass a love of nature and the kind of touchy-feely sensitivities that give conservatives the willies, but also the bedrock principles of tradition and ownership and self-reliance that would be equally at home at a hippie commune or a tea party rally.**

While it is rightly noted that the grades at the school quickly improved, the contention that “a recipe is much easier to write than a coherent paragraph on The Crucible” is not only insulting to professional chefs and food writers (like, well, me), but also is patently false. There is a world of difference between writing a recipe and writing one well, as anyone who as ever come across the words “but first” in a recipe will attest. **The more important point though is the one that Flanagan glosses over: that the passion for learning developed in a garden, driven home by the lightening-bolt of awareness when a kid bites into a vine-ripened tomato she grew herself, is worth essays on ten plays even if Arthur Miller or Shakespeare wrote them all.**

Where the argument really goes off the rails though is when Ms Flanagan posits:

“Does the immigrant farm worker dream that his child will learn to enjoy manual labor, or that his child will be freed from it? What is the goal of an education, of what we once called ‘book learning’?” These are questions best left unasked when it comes to the gardens.

**Not “enjoy,” Ms, Flanagan, respect. This, as I mentioned, is where her disdain for manual labor, something that everyone on the planet (beneath the upper 2% or so of income earners) contends with every day, becomes instructive. It is predicated on the idea that labor is something to be freed from, ostensibly through strict adherence to “book learning.” Worse, it perpetuates the misguided dogma of the last several decades that distances us from our food and insists that cooking is a chore, like washing laundry or windows, which should be avoided at all costs as if it were beneath us. This in turn not only makes her seem elitist herself, but also leaves Ms. Flanagan’s ideas of education as merely a means to create consumers, rather than citizens.**

What follows in the essay is a misuse of statistics that boggles the mind, where she blames a decline in math and English among Latinos at MLK on the gardens. In legal-ese (and Latin) this is referred to as a **Post hoc ergo propter hoc** argument, “It follows therefore was caused by.” Another example of this would be that since all addicts were once babies, then mother’s milk leads to heroin addiction.

This is followed up by an argument that the rampant increase in childhood obesity and early-onset diabetes is not caused by a lack of access to healthy food nor the prevalence of sugary, fat laden food in schools. Rather she cites, ironically, George Orwell, to argue that it’s because poor people prefer that food. Please. And for the record, her research into two grocery stores in Compton as proof that poverty and food deserts do not go hand-in-hand is blindingly shortsighted.

There are more errors of reason, but let me cut to the chase. Ms. Flanagan sums up by saying this: “(W)e become complicit— through our best intentions—in an act of theft that will not only contribute to the creation of a permanent, uneducated underclass but will rob that group of the very force necessary to change its fate. The state, which failed these students as children and adolescents, will have to shoulder them in adulthood, for it will have created not a generation of gentleman farmers but one of intellectual sharecroppers, whose fortunes depend on the largesse or political whim of their educated peers.”

**The belief that we will create better citizens by teaching to the test (an idea she advocates for repeatedly and vociferously) is one that will lead to a generation of closed-minded automatons incapable of learning, thinking, or fending for themselves. We are far better off with a generation of Citizens who understand that sustenance comes not from factories or laboratories but from the soil and from hard working hands, both of which deserve the respect garnered from experience. We need Citizens who are healthier than the generation before them; throughout most of human history the rich were fat and the poor were skinny, yet today in America it is quite the opposite. Fixing that requires direct experience and interaction with our food, something no schoolroom lecture can provide.**

This is not advocacy for some weird Maoist Great Leap Forward where everyone must leave the cities and go farm. It is knowledge of one of the truest clichés known: You are what you eat. And as one of Ms. Flanagan’s carefully-book-taught computer programmers would point out, Garbage In – Garbage Out.

**American students falling behind other countries**

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|  *chris12345* [1 year ago](http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33570/#comment-35812695) [in reply to Sam](http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33570/#comment-35812678) |

No offense to anyone here who may be American but as a teacher, I have found many of my American transfer students really struggle in the Canadian school system. Not all, but a large majority of those who I have taught are significantly behind their Canadian counterparts in the maths, sciences, and languages. I have found on average it takes 3-5 years for them to catch up, depending on age.

All this talk of gardens is all well and good, but it really is a very inefficient use of classroom time. In the time it takes them to do the agricultural work, they have lost the opportunity to perform dozens of calculations or have read a chapter or two in their books. You could argue the classical quality over quantity argument, but other classroom participatory routines can be used to achieve better results from students in less time. If a student can not keep up academically they most often times do not progress in the system. Usually the student does not like this, and works harder since they will find themselves separated from their acquaintances.

Maybe as a field trip, garden work has potential. It should not however waste time in a limited (7:30am - 5:00pm) school day here.

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|  [http://mediacdn.disqus.com/1316454436/images/noavatar32.png](http://disqus.com/guest/b28b1b6943b52265e69873e79b7eb752/) | *QueenCeleste* [1 year ago](http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33570/#comment-35812706) [in reply to chris12345](http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33570/#comment-35812695) |

No offense taken--in fact I've experienced this first hand. My family moved to the US for a year when I was in 5th grade. When we moved back to Europe a year later I was way behind my peers at school and it took a long time to catch up. Lets make sure kids get a solid basic education before adding extras. By the way, I'm all for food reform in this country, but it has to happen at the political level first. Let's reform agricultural subsidies so that small, non-factory, non-monoculture farms get to thrive!!

**But will it work? Can students learn what they need to learn in a garden?**

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|  | *crimfan* [1 year ago](http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33570/#comment-35812714) |

As someone else pointed out way up in the thread, while Berkeley elite poster child Alice Waters might be one of the prime movers of this, it seems to me to be is a profoundly conservative idea. (When I say conservative, here I mean "little c" conservative, that is not modern "movement" political conservative.) In an educational world of throwaway assignments, I'd have to say that something that teaches children lessons like the value of teamwork, patience, the fact that things don't always work the way you planned, and the value of carrying a project through to the end are all golden, rock-solid conservative lessons. (Also, the physical activity is probably helpful for the more rambunctious students.)

Speaking as a post-secondary educator, many students lack the kinds of executive function skills when they get to me, and I don't even see the ones who never make it through all the selection barriers. But forget my own anecdotal evidence, I know from persistence rates for vulnerable students such as children of immigrants in community colleges that they can't even acquire the kinds of academic skills they need without a huge dose of executive function skills such as how to set realistic, achievable goals, how to carry through a project to the end, how to get help when you need it because you find out things aren't working, etc. Community colleges are where many of the children of immigrants are likely to end up and the dropout rates are truly ferocious. At NYC community colleges, they range but some are pushing 90%. (I work in NYC.) I'm not sure if gardening will teach those skills---probably it's going to differ across students and some never will learn---but I'm pretty sure yet another drill 'n' kill math or spelling lesson won't.

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|  | *Christine Leishman* [1 year ago](http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33570/#comment-35812729) |

Ms. Flanagan’s article, “Cultivating Failure”, is misleading and her portrayal of a young child of migrant workers being kept from a proper education by “foodies and educational reformers” is emotionally manipulative and irresponsible. As someone who has worked as a chef in the San Francisco Bay Area for over 20 years, created a “Learning Garden” in an urban elementary school, and is currently getting a Multi-Subject Teaching Credential I find Ms. Flanagan’s implication that Alice Waters and the Edible Schoolyard are representative of school gardens across the country absurd. The annual budget for the Edible Schoolyard is something like $400,000; the amount of money spent on school gardens in San Francisco Unified School District is somewhere between $2000 and $20,000 a year and that is not coming out of the school site budget. It is donated by parents; parents like me who are raising their children in an urban environment, sending them to public school, and want them to understand where food comes from.  
  
Research strongly supports that garden-based education increases academic achievement and often results in higher test scores. Studies show that working in a school garden helps children to improve in science, gain a greater understanding of and respect for the environment, develop healthier eating habits, and become better stewards of their schoolyards.   
  
•Science achievement of students who participated in a hands-on gardening program was higher than that of students who only engaged in classroom curriculum. (Klemmer et al. 2005)  
  
•A broad study of 40 schools from across the U.S. shows that environment-based education curriculum results in better performance on standardized achievement tests. (Lieberman & Hoody 1998)  
  
School gardens are the ultimate win-win; they provide an outdoor classroom experience on campuses that previously looked more like prison yards than schools, help to make science relevant and exciting, as well as provide a natural space for inspiration and observation. We are not educating young people just to take tests; we are educating them to become intelligent adults with a keen interest in, and a sense of responsibility for, the world around them.

<http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33570/>