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[Corby Kummer](http://www.theatlantic.com/corby-kummer/) - Corby Kummer's work in *The Atlantic* has established him as one of the most widely read, authoritative, and creative food writers in the United States. The *San Francisco Examiner* pronounced him "a dean among food writers in America." [More](http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33697/#bio)

**School Gardeners Strike Back**

By Corby Kummer

Jan 15 2010, 9:38 AM ET [1](http://www.theatlantic.com/life/archive/2010/01/school-gardeners-strike-back/33697/#disqus_thread)

Okamoto's full letter:

In my four years as the Program Supervisor for the Berkeley Unified School District's (BUSD) Garden and Cooking program and four years prior both managing two of BUSD's middle school garden and cooking programs and leading farm field studies for the district's students, I have seen tremendous growth in the students who have participated in the district's garden and cooking-based nutrition education program.

BUSD's program serves students at 14 public school sites from preschool to high school, all of which have 50% or more of their students participating in the free and reduced price lunch program and receive funding from the USDA Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program through the Network for a Healthy California. Over the years, numerous teachers have reported that gardens and cooking classes increase student participation during class and improve their attitudes toward learning, help students who often struggle in a classroom setting, and provide real-life learning contexts to teach nutrition education and core subjects such as science, math, and social studies.

Flanagan's claim that garden-based education fails to help our students achieve academically takes an incredibly narrow view of how garden-based programs have been used around the country to support student learning and achievement.

So often it's a teacher who reports how a student was able to grasp a key concept within a hands-on context in the garden, or how another student who had not participated at all in class joined in on the discussion once in the cooking class. While these stories might seem fluffy or trite to Flanagan, they are very real to the teachers and students in the program.

With a variety of garden-based education models taking root in districts across the country, numerous studies have shown that garden-based education programs have positive impacts on student's attitudes toward learning and their academic achievement. In a report published by the State Education and Environment Roundtable, *Closing the Achievement Gap: Using the Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning* (Lieberman & Hoody, 1998), 12 state educational agencies, including the California Department of Education, conducted an evaluation of 40 schools utilizing outdoor environmental education as a context for learning.

The 40 programs shared similar educational strategies that included breaking down traditional boundaries between disciplines; providing hands-on learning experiences, often through problem-solving and project-based activities; relying on team teaching; adapting to individual students and their unique skills and abilities; and developing knowledge, understanding, and appreciation for the environment, community, and natural surroundings.

In another study of a district-wide place-based math and science initiative over a three-year period, the percentage of 4th graders performing at an unsatisfactory level dropped 13.2 percentage points compared to a statewide decrease of 6.5 points. Math scores saw a 14.1 percent point decline in district students with unsatisfactory performance compared with a statewide decline of 3.6 points. Students at these schools were involved in more outdoor experiential, place-relevant learning, including nature trails, gardens, and studies of weather and soil.

Flanagan assumes that students can only learn about math, reading, language arts, or other core subject in a classroom setting. Taking a one size fits all approach to education limits our ability to address the diverse needs of our students. To be sure, with the looming achievement gap in our schools we need to take a hard look at what we are teaching in our classrooms--and yes, in our school gardens. But throwing out school gardens in particular, along with experiential education in general, will only serve to cramp teaching strategies into an already narrowly defined box of what constitutes valid education. One wonders how Flanagan might feel about other subjects that take up time during the day, such as art, music, and physical education. Might these be cultivating failure as well?

We need to be steadfast in our commitment to provide high-quality education that offers academic rigor and standards-based education, effective teaching strategies that engage multiple learning styles, and culturally responsive staff development. Berkeley Unified School District's garden-based education programs have been evolving for more than 10 years. With the support of administrators, teachers, parents, and our students, we've seen firsthand the benefits and value that gardens provide to our children and communities.

Sincerely,

Melanie Okamoto

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