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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/33570/#bio)

**School Gardeners Strike Back**

By Corby Kummer

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Photo Courtesy of The Edible Schoolyard

If this patronizing agenda were promulgated in the Jim Crow South by a white man who was espousing a sharecropping curriculum for African American students, we would see it for what it is: a way of bestowing field work and low expectations on a giant population of students who might become troublesome if they actually got an education.

Caitlin Flanagan is good at flamethrowing, and this is the incendiary heart of her [argument](http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/201001/school-yard-garden) in the current issue of *The Atlantic*. The children of Hispanic farmworkers around Los Angeles, where she lives, and the rest of California are being forced to waste their time, and the public's money, learning skills their parents want them to leave behind; the proper—the only—role of public education is to make children perform well enough on standardized state tests to graduate from high school and go on to college and the higher socioeconomic status their parents desperately want them to have.

In the article Flanagan saves special scorn—she's really good at witty, seemingly undisputable scorn; I've long enjoyed her writing, and once in a while even agreed with it—for Alice Waters and the [Edible Schoolyard](http://www.edibleschoolyard.org/), the program Waters launched 15 years ago at a Berkeley middle school where she saw a vacant lot. She has tirelessly and relentlessly turned that garden and a kitchen-classroom she built into a national movement to incorporate gardens into schools and what students learn in gardens into the school curriculum. It's no stretch to say that Michelle Obama [planted](http://food.theatlantic.com/corbys-fresh-feeds/alice-waters-michelle-obama-and-wall-e.php) a garden on the White House Lawn and invited schoolchildren to be her first helpers as a direct result of Waters's crusade.

Obama has made childhood obesity her goal, and uses the garden to spread her message of improving children's diets and health. Flanagan goes after Waters for thinking that working in a garden can improve a child's ability to learn. She ridicules the idea that Hispanic farm workers' children need any introduction to fresh fruits and vegetables or won't get them other than in a school garden or cafeteria. Why, Compton, the extremely low-income Hispanic neighborhood in Los Angeles Flanagan visits to check her thesis, is a positive paradise of lively markets selling plenty of fresh fruit and produce!

If Flanagan was focused on children's diets and the effect that being well-nourished has on school performance, she would lambaste herself with the relish she reserves for Waters. California is, of course, the country's most abundant agricultural state—the reason there are so many of the farm workers' children whose educational rights she so staunchly defends. School gardens across the country, as she ignores, are in "food deserts"—urban, and rural, neighborhoods without ready or any access to markets selling fresh fruits and vegetables (and probably school gardens in other parts of California, too.)

Even in Berkeley, the question is not whether families can drive to the Berkeley Bowl, the famous produce paradise. It's whether parents will buy fresh produce and children will eat it, as Marsha Guerrero, executive director of the Berkeley Edible Schoolyard, told me. (Her reaction to the article? "There are a lot of crackpots who don't understand what we do.") "It's not as simple as going to the Bowl and buying chard," she said. "If kids are *growing* it, they'll eat it. And if they eat it, they might suggest that their parents buy it."

As we spoke, Guerrero was passing by the kitchen-classroom, and described the scene: "Kids are grinding grain on a bike, learning about how much land it takes to grow grain, and measuring how much grain they have before and after they grind it. It's a math lesson." It was the kind of scene that was a perfect illustration of the guiding principle Waters told me (she called about ten minutes after the piece appeared online) she had spent her five years as a Montessori-trained teacher pursuing: "You learn by doing, by mentoring, by connecting to the bigger world outside the school. It's like getting students engaged at home with adult activities—they all want to do it. It works like a dream." And it was the kind of scene that would have Flanagan hearing not a whirring grindstone but chalk down a blackboard.

Guerrero had no test scores to refute Flanagan; that's never been a focus of the Edible Schoolyard. But nor has the program ever relied on the public funds Flanagan says can't be wasted in what is demonstrably one of the lowest-performing state school systems in the country. (For background on the ballot initiative that wrecked California schools, see [here](http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200507/fallows/3) and [here](http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/97nov/read.htm)).

For a view from another and yet more dysfunctional school system, I called Tony Recasner, the charismatic and farsighted head of the Samuel J. Green School, in New Orleans. Recasner opened the charter school he had spent several years building two weeks before Hurricane Katrina, and had it back up and running before almost any other school after the storm. It and a second charter school he built, Arthur Ashe, now teach about 550 students in grades K-8.

I'd met and been impressed by Recasner shortly after the storm. He'd shown me the former girl's locker room at the Green school where he planned to raise money for a teaching kitchen he would put right next to the cafeteria. Thanks to vigorous fundraising (even President Bush made a speech at the school on one of his damage-control swings through the city) he was able to build that kitchen. And thanks to pushing Sodexho, the huge conglomberate that provides the school food, he was able to get fresh fruits and vegetables into the cafeteria at no additional cost (Sodexho didn't give him a break, he told me; the company just needed convincing that students would actually eat fresh food).

Recasner had read Flanagan's piece (I sent it to him before we talked). "If I felt it was a waste of public money and students' time," he said, "if I felt I was crippling kids we serve and robbing them of valuable time, I wouldn't have participated in this." As in California and in Greensboro, North Carolina, the Edible Schoolyard program uses no public funds other than maintenance and some staff time—costs Recasner called "not unreasonable, given the number of government programs that have come down pike to address the same type of thing." He said, "We feel that with all the programs we've seen over the years—I've been doing this for 20 years—this comes the closest to addressing the problems kids have."

Those problems are eating a healthful diet and doing well in school, and Recasner told me he had seen measurable improvement in both. "All our food goes to our kitchen," Donna Cavato, the director of the New Orleans Edible Schoolyard, told me. "Families take home the remaining produce—we harvest 3,000 pounds a year. Parents tell us that the biggest impact has been changing the way kids eat. The school is in a neighborhood that doesn't have a grocery store. My own neighborhood doesn't have one."

Yes, test scores have improved since the program started, Recasner said. But "we didn't go after this to prove causation," he added. "What we know about gardens is that it opens experiential pathways for kids to learn," he said. "Different learning experiences correlate highly with improved test scores. This gives kids a stronger background knowledge in the kinds of subjects that are likely to appear on standardized tests. They'll see the kinds of ideas, people, concepts, and different languages they're exposed to with the Edible Schoolyard appear on tests. It's very helpful."

That's a measured defense of school gardens, and a measured refutation of Flanagan's fairly indefensible argument, which is in its way as elitist and dismissive as she calls Waters. School gardens might not have been proven, yet, to make students get higher scores. But they will make students lead richer lives—and likely better-educated ones too.

**UPDATE**: I asked Melanie Okamoto, of the Berkeley school system, to address Flanagan's claims about student achievement; she has overseen non-Edible Schoolyard programs in many schools that also have and use gardens. She sent me a page of related and interesting [links](http://www.csgn.org/research.php?cat=academic) on academic performance from the California School Garden Network, and highlighted some of her and its main findings in the letter below. Her main point, then full contents of her letter.

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.

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