



**For Immediate Release**  
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## Media Release

### **School gardens a growing trend at district schools**

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**Charleston, SC** –School gardens can be a great asset in reinforcing many classroom concepts. They are also an essential aspect of teaching healthy eating and proper nutrition. A husband and wife teacher team at St. Andrews School of Math and Science, David and Melissa Wingard, have taken the rooftop garden to a whole new level.

For years the couple taught at Julian Mitchell Elementary School, where the Green Heart Project created an entire gardening program and curriculum.

The Green Heart Project was founded in 2009 as a small school garden at Mitchell to reconnect their students with fresh, locally-grown produce. As a Title-1 public school in a labeled food desert, most Mitchell students come from low-income households that lack access to the fresh fruits and vegetables needed for a healthy lifestyle.

With this knowledge, local neighborhood residents Karalee Nielsen and Chauncey Jordan founded the project with the hopes of changing those facts. Together with a group of friends, and an open-minded principal looking for alternative ways to teach and inspire, they devised a plan to build an urban garden, utilizing the experience as a service-learning project to teach students the value of growing your food.

The project quickly became a success and was duplicated in varying ways in other schools.

When the Wingards arrived at St. Andrew's a few years ago, they saw an attempt had been made with a rooftop garden, but it was in need of sprucing up. Using what they learned from The Green Heart Project, bringing it back to life would be the easy part. What they really wanted was an increase in class participation and community involvement to turn the rooftop garden into something really special.

"The benefits of teaching science standards via a garden are clear," said Melissa. "The curriculum we designed, however, uses gardening to teach about the benefits of healthy eating, engineering, and math."

David said it promotes problem-solving and encourages good nutritional habits.

"When we came here, we saw the need for an upgrade to the garden, and we knew the most efficient way to do that would be to include the community," said David. "We knew that if we were going to improve and expand, we would have to mobilize everyone. We've applied to have The Greenheart Project at St. Andrews and have partnered with area business for donations and solicited parent volunteers to help with upkeep."

The Charleston Horticultural Society stepped in to help design a garden that is accessible and inviting. William Shuler of South Carolina Backyard Farms has agreed to volunteer and donate seeds. In addition, Leadership Charleston has chosen the St. Andrews rooftop garden as their non-profit for the year. Their members and volunteers will begin the total overhaul of the garden, which will be completed at the end of the summer.

"We have a great group of parent volunteers who restock and fertilize," said Melissa. "Our cafeteria is supportive of our efforts and hosted a taste testing for the entire school. We've used our school news show to relay information on the nutritional value of certain foods to the students."

David has a green thumb and enjoys the actual work. Melissa is the facilitator.

"For many people, gardening is out of their comfort zone," said Melissa. "So we're demonstrating the benefits to working in the garden and the fun it can be for the kids."

Melissa said they want to encourage their colleagues to take the risk of planting something that may not come to fruition.

"I'm not a gardener, so I use science and evidence to improve my skills," said Melissa. "Mistakes are just as valuable as results. Kids are amazed that we can grow food in such small spaces. If something doesn't grow, then we'll try again with better methods."

Melissa said that because of COVID-19, field trips were not allowed. This rooftop garden was the perfect solution to giving students a change of scenery while still learning.

"There is nothing better than an outdoor classroom on a beautiful day," said Melissa. "What we're teaching, too with the gardening curriculum, fits into the vision of St. Andrew's, which is a math and science school."

The curriculum includes lessons on sustainability, stewards of the earth, community, nutrition, science, math experimenting, and gardening techniques.

"The garden nor the curriculum will not look the same every year as we expand and grow," said Melissa. "We will encourage experimenting."

This year alone, the garden has produced brussell sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cucumber, kale, onions, parsley, parsnips, and peas.

"Our end goal is that this will be fused into all of our curricula," said Melissa. "we also hope to be able to open the rooftop garden up to the community through garden chats, taste tests, and more."

### **Pollinator Garden**

In addition, the Charleston Horticultural Society has been helping to create a pollinator garden at the school to enhance curriculum across the grade levels. Claudia McNab, a landscape designer and master gardener emeritus, has designed a beautiful pollinator garden that encompasses various native plants.

The Charleston Horticultural Society reached out to Soil3, and they donated the soil needed to prep the garden. The Mark Elliott Foundation and GroMoreGood Grant have also helped to fund this installation. Roots & Shoots will begin the installation by planting the three largest plants in our garden.

"Our first initial planting was April 25," said Jennifer Wood, Lead Teacher at St. Andrew's. "The pollinator garden will provide excellent opportunities for our students to study native plants, pollination, insects, gardening skills and maintenance, and many other fabulous educational connections."

Pollinators face many threats such as loss of habitat, climate change, and decreased diversity of plants. Due to these unfortunate circumstances, it is critical to teach students about this important part of our ecosystem.

According to Wood, students across the grade levels can play an intricate part in researching and maintaining the pollinator garden.

"We will have a variety of native plants such as Lantana, Swamp Sunflower, Passion Flower Vine, Becky Daisy, Hydrangea, Blue Eyed Grass, and Carolina Jessamine," said Wood. "This is just naming a few of the colorful assortment that will encompass our garden."

Wood said the project is an excellent opportunity for hands-on, cross-curricular learning.

"What better way to engage the students for some in-depth learning of the life cycles of some pollinators along with learning their nutrient and shelter needs,"

said Wood. "It's also going to be a great way to connect with our school families and community. We're excited to get this pollinator garden developed and thriving!"

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#### **About the Charleston County School District**

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally-accredited school district that is committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all of its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 87 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools. Options include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military.