



ACCELERATING NATIONAL COMMUNITY HEALTH OUTCOMES THROUGH REINFORCING PARTNERSHIPS

## CLOSING THE FOOD ACCESS GAP THROUGH SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY GARDENS



A major concern for public health officials and community stakeholders is healthy food access. San Antonio tops the nation when it comes to percentage of the population living in areas with limited supermarket access. Residents in these neighborhoods are more likely to have poor diets, a contributing factor for obesity, diabetes, and other health problems. The American Heart Association is working to improve access to nutritious foods for all people San Antonio. Efforts include promoting zoning changes that allow community gardens throughout the city, supporting increased urban farming, and increasing public awareness of the availability and affordability of healthy food options.

The American Heart Association is also helping to bring more fresh and healthy foods to the students and their families in the North East Independent School District (ISD) in Bexar County. With the American Heart Association's support, North East ISD enhanced its school garden program by creating a toolkit to provide students, teachers, and administrators with guidance on planning, designing and sustaining gardens. The American Heart Association supported toolkit development by working within the district's School Health Advisory Council. The School Health Advisory Council also developed a Farm to School plan that will make it easier for school cafeterias to serve meals using locally grown healthy food.

### The Challenge

According to a report by the U.S. Treasury's Community Development Financial Institutions Fund, San Antonio ranks No. 1 in population percentage living in areas with limited supermarket access. Roughly 24 percent of the city's population, or about 505,000 residents, have difficulty finding stores close to home that offer healthy food. Many of these people will instead turn to convenience stores and purchase pre-packaged, less healthy food options. Poor nutrition often leads to obesity, already a significant problem in San Antonio. It also can lead to diabetes, high blood pressure and many secondary health problems including heart disease, kidney failure, and premature death.



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## The Solution

Getting healthy foods closer to where people live, work, and attend school is essential to reducing disparities in food access. North East ISD, the second largest school district in Bexar County, oversaw the development of a School Garden Toolkit and a Farm to School plan to help bring healthy foods to students and their families. The district already had over 20 schools with gardens, but their conditions varied greatly depending on the management level at each site.

American Heart Association staff helped the school district with its creation of the toolkit, offering input on structure and content, and sharing best practices outlined in the American Heart Association's Teaching Garden program and the Garden Community online forum. The American Heart Association also interviewed teachers who oversaw successful gardens and brought back valuable information on the keys to success.

The new School Garden Toolkit addresses a range of stages, from pre-development to sustainability, that any school or community can adapt to fit their needs. The district's School Health Advisory Council, which evaluates health and wellness practices, will submit the toolkit to the School Board for adoption as a district-wide resource.

## Sustaining Success

Historically within the Bexar County, insufficient planning led to the failure of many of the school gardens that did not take long-term sustainability into consideration. Inevitable challenges arose when teachers who start the gardens move away, or the original student body moves on to the next school. Summer vacation also invites inattentiveness. The School Garden Toolkit addresses all of those issues and offers examples of workable solutions.

Additionally, the toolkit can be shared with community members to help care for their community gardens. Outside of the ANCHOR activities, the American Heart Association supported a zoning change that now allows urban farming throughout San Antonio. The local ANCHOR project is now working to promote and market the zoning changes so that urban gardeners can begin taking advantage of healthier options. Having another resource available to support gardening will help sustain these efforts.

## Policy, System and Environmental Change

The district's School Health Advisory Council will go before the School Board for approval and official adoption. The toolkit represents a systems wide change for North East ISD. Every school wishing to start a garden will consult the toolkit before beginning the project to ensure they have appropriate resources. Additionally, the toolkit is a resource that can support the recent San Antonio policy change that allows for city-wide urban gardening.

Introducing healthy foods through gardening not only helps people meet daily nutritional recommendations and curb obesity rates, it encourages a culture of healthy eating and establishes an environment for additional policy change around healthy food access.

## Results

The impact of the new toolkit is already being felt as some of its best practices are being put to use by several schools in San Antonio. At Douglas MacArthur High School, students have started a new garden and are composting fruit and vegetable trimmings from the cafeteria. Colonial Hills Elementary also started a new garden and plans to have a local church group take care of it over the summer. The adoption and official endorsement by North East ISD of the garden toolkit as a go-to guide will resonate widely among the 75 schools and 68,000 students the district serves, and will carry throughout the wider community.

## Get Involved

We encourage everyone to seek out and participate in a community, home, or school garden. Additional support always is welcome, and needed, in garden maintenance. Get involved in local efforts and check out AHA resources available online: [Teaching Gardens Guide](#). Help close the food access gap and promote healthy, local foods in your community!