

[The following letter was delivered to Superintendent Jerry Weast and the Montgomery County Board of Education on June 3, 2010.]

Superintendent Jerry D. Weast
Montgomery County Public Schools
850 Hungerford Drive
Room 122
Rockville, MD 20850

cc: Montgomery County Public Schools Board of Education

Dear Dr. Weast -

As citizens and taxpayers of Montgomery County, and as parents, grandparents and community-based activists, we are disappointed and distressed by your decision to ban vegetable gardens at MCPS (February 26th memo to the Board of Education regarding "Community Gardens and School Gardens"). We urge you to reconsider the anti-vegetable garden policy, and we are offering our help to ensure that the vegetable gardens at Montgomery County Public Schools are successful.

We're sure you know of the rapidly growing movement of school vegetable gardens. Literally thousands of schools across the nation are starting or expanding vegetable gardens, including many here in Maryland and in the neighboring District of Columbia. In fact, First Lady Michelle Obama is actively championing the cause of school food gardens, and taking her message all over the United States. We believe it is ill advised for MCPS to ban vegetable gardens. It's a discredit to our fine school system, and robs our children of an important opportunity to learn how to lead active and healthy lives. Across the country, schools are adopting vegetable gardens because of the multiple benefits they provide to children, their families and their communities.

Even more than the other types of gardens currently approved by MCPS, vegetable gardens provide a rich learning laboratory where almost any academic subject can be taught, from science and math to art, history, social studies, and cultural studies. Vegetable gardens can build environmental understanding and stewardship among young people, so critical in our age of multiple environmental threats. In addition, working in vegetable gardens provides children a healthy physical activity, and opportunities for positive and enriching social development and community engagement. Increasingly these findings are being documented in the research literature. We have attached a summary of a few such studies for your review and consideration.

School vegetable gardens are also terrific places to teach, encourage, and model healthy lifestyle and eating habits. As you also know, we have a skyrocketing epidemic of childhood obesity, and 1 out of every 3 children born after 2000 are expected to develop diabetes at some point in their life. One crucial way to address this crisis is by encouraging children and families to develop healthy eating habits early by consuming more fresh fruit and vegetables. To this end, it is hard to imagine a better use for a

small part of school grounds than for a vegetable garden, or any better activity for kids than to spend an hour or two during a school week involved with such a garden.

We understand that such vegetable gardens do not come without work, and commitment from administrators, teachers and parents. Garden maintenance is a critical issue, and we agree that it must be addressed in all plans for gardens. However, fear of maintenance problems is not a reason to ban vegetable gardens. Currently, the Department of Facilities Management requires a maintenance plan for all proposed gardens. We support this, and believe all proposed garden plans could include both a budget and steps for dismantling the garden if it is abandoned or falls into disrepair. If summer maintenance is a concern, a school could emphasize spring and fall crops, both of which are easy to cultivate in our region, and grown and harvested while schools are in session. Alternately, the garden proposal could include participation of community members from surrounding neighborhoods, which would ensure the garden is welcomed by the local community and that it thrives throughout the summer. We are even aware of situations where small grants have been awarded to provide "green collar jobs" to students maintaining the garden over the summer. Vegetable gardens do represent some maintenance challenges, but many schools around the state and country are successfully meeting these challenges. We are confident that the teachers, administrators and parents of Montgomery County could do the same.

Among the other concerns expressed in your memo are the presence of pests and food allergies. While these are real issues, they are hardly caused by or limited to school vegetable gardens. We believe it is possible to maintain a very safe environment for our school children while encouraging school vegetable gardens. To address such concerns, there are many models of garden safety guidelines for schools. We have attached the guidelines developed by the University of Maryland Extension's Master Gardener State Coordinator, Jon Traunfeld, who is an expert on vegetable gardening.

Regarding pests, and in particular rodents, those of us who work in and with community gardens can attest that pest infestations are simply *not* a problem encountered in a maintained vegetable garden. In Montgomery County, we can point to the community vegetable gardens run by the Montgomery County Parks Department, which are clearly free of such pests. Schools with vegetable gardens across the country (including in cities such as Washington D.C.) report few if any such problems. Maintained food gardens do not invite any realistic threat of dangerous pests.

Regarding potential allergies, the most common food allergies among children are to milk and eggs. We wouldn't think of banning them from schools, and we believe that exposure to fresh vegetables and fruit falls into a similar category. Care needs to be taken with children who are allergic, but we should not prevent others from receiving the benefits of a particular food, or the activity of food gardening. If a child has such allergies, he or she can simply stay out of the garden. (Just as you would keep an injured child from participating in a sport.) If several children in a school have an allergy to a particular fresh vegetable, the school garden can stop growing it.

We hope that this information allays your concerns regarding any safety issues involved with school vegetable gardens.

Finally, we want to be clear that we are not asking MCPS to spend money or require staff time for

vegetable gardens at MCPS schools. We understand the extraordinary restraints on the school and county budgets at this time. What we are asking is that the MCPS Administration review proposals from schools that want to start vegetable gardens, and approve those demonstrating the necessary commitment along with an appropriate plan. As parents, citizens, and community activists in Montgomery County, we pledge our commitment to help these schools achieve success in the highly beneficial and positive activity of food gardening. And as a next step, we would be happy to meet with you to discuss any remaining concerns and/or a possible plan to bring vegetable gardens to our county's schools.

We know there are many demands on your busy schedule, Dr. Weast, and thank you for your time and consideration of this issue, as well as for all your efforts on behalf of our county's school children. We look forward to hearing back from you on this vital matter.

Sincerely,

Gordon Clark, Project Director
Montgomery Victory Gardens
822 Gist Ave. Suite 100
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Sheryl Freishtat, President
Montgomery County Master Gardener Association
18410 Muncaster Road
Derwood, MD 20855

***Current Montgomery County organizational co-signers, as of 8/23/10
(additional co-signers after original delivery are forwarded to MCPS
Superintendent Weast):***

Audubon Naturalist Society
Cherrywood Garden Club (Olney)
Chesapeake Education, Arts and Research Society
Crossroads Farmers Market
Dickerson Community Association
Earth Day Network
East Silver Spring Community Association
Gaithersburg Washington Grove Neighborhood Garden Club
GrowingSoul
Indian Spring Civic Association
Linden Civic Association
Maayan Olam: the Torah/Environment Committee of Silver Spring

Montgomery Countryside Alliance
Montgomery County Commission on Health
Montgomery County Green Party
Montgomery County Veg-Up
National Capital Area Garden Clubs, District IV (Montgomery County)
North Hills Civic Association
North Woodside Civic Association
Park Hills Civic Association, Executive Committee
Silver Spring Garden Club
South Silver Spring Neighborhood Association
Sugarloaf Citizen's Association
Takoma Horticultural Club
Takoma Park Silver Spring Co-op
Through the Kitchen Door International, Inc.
Washington Gardener Magazine
West Montgomery County Citizens Association
Woodley Gardens Garden Club (Rockville)
Woodside Civic Association
Woodside Forest Civic Association
Woodside Park Civic Association