

## Hard is Not Bad

### Outdoor Learning at the Samuel Adams School

By Cindy Ballenger

On a warm day this fall, Sara Gardner and Cindy Ballenger from the Friends of the Boston Schoolyards visited the Adams School in East Boston as two inclusion kindergarten classes enjoyed the garden. At this urban school the teachers and their partners, Green City Growers, have developed a garden. They have done so in a tiny pocket of land, overlooking the Boston Harbor, in the midst of the city, very securely fenced so no one tumbles down into the bay, just large enough for some freedom of movement and for the teachers and children to manage.

This spot of greenery is enjoyed by the students on a regular basis. They say this year they had an excellent crop of tomatoes, good lettuce, beans, and kale. There are a few remaining beans drying on the vine which will be used for seeds for the following Spring.

The garden is also used for various purposes. Teachers often bring reading groups out when the weather is good. The Pre-K goes out every morning just to enjoy and explore the space. These city children don't otherwise have a great deal of opportunity to sit in the outdoors.

Jessica McNiff, the science teacher and coordinator of the garden, has also expanded the work to families. She did an outdoor teaching and learning week in June where she offered a different activity for families each day after school.

Sara and Cindy watched as two kindergarten classes worked in the garden; these classes combined students from a classroom of typical students with children with special needs. The special needs students occasionally required extra direction making it momentarily hard, but, as their teacher, Sidney Schultheiss, said, "Hard is not bad." She went on to explain, "There's just something special about watching our students' curiosity bloom right alongside the garden. ... the kids dig in (literally!) to learn what helps plants grow and thrive. It is such a rewarding reminder that it's okay to shake up the typical classroom routine." We watched as students from both classes drew pictures of an imagined garden around a real bean seed glued to their paper. Some children checked out each other's ideas and drawings, asking about the children in the other class.

One boy watched a leaf fall on his drawing clipboard. He stared at it. It fell to the ground. Without speaking he seemed to make it clear that he wanted it back. Cindy handed it to him, and he replaced it where it had been. This happened three more times. He was studying something. They also loved finding bugs, especially pillbugs. One otherwise very silent boy explained to Sara about the bugs he has at home.

Another child, a boy, was intrigued by the spot on an apple tree where a branch had come off. He kept feeling the scarred circle and asking what had happened.

Once finished they explored the garden, jumping from paving stone to paving stone, spinning the composter, touching and looking at the plants still producing tomatoes or those now only presenting seedheads. All these

city kindergarteners seemed to love having dirt on their hands, and also washing it off! It was a joy to watch the range of responses.

The main farmer from Green City Growers is Cara Goodman with Emily Power assisting. Her goals for the kindergarten classes are to introduce some concepts of seeds and growing, and then to allow the students to have some fun and sensory exploration. The second graders coming next in the day were going to be adding some dirt and compost to the plants. The project runs from April 1st to December 1<sup>st</sup>.

The garden is a triumph of collaboration. They have a new partnership with [Tufts Engineers Without Borders](#) to work on making the various outdoor spaces fully accessible. The shed where they keep their garden materials was built by Brendan Pursel and the Carpentry Department at Madison Park Technical Vocational High School. The students take sailing lessons with Piers Park Sailing Center, and [TreeEastie](#) helped plant apple trees in the front of the school building, as well as in the Urban Wild on the hillside between the school and Piers Park. The first apples, which admittedly were a bit gnarly but still a delight for the students, appeared this year. Altogether these urban students are having exciting introductions to nature.

Jessica, the school based coordinator, says the whole process of using the garden has created one additional and unexpected benefit—communication has grown among the teachers. As they coordinate and share ideas for their various uses of the garden, they are expanding and reflecting with each other on their commitment to education and to nature.

