

Interview with Elizabeth Hadly and Molly Peters, BPS Science Department

BPS Teacher Champions

By Barbara Mclaughlin

Sara Gardner and I had the opportunity recently to meet with Elizabeth Hadly and Molly Peters, program directors in the Boston Public Schools (BPS) Science Department. We were interested in learning more about their perspective on the Teaching & Learning Outdoors (TLO) Champions program which was highlighted in the December 2025 Friends of the Boston Schoolyards Newsletter. The teacher champions overwhelmingly praised the program and the impact it has had on their teaching and the confidence it has given them as educators.

Molly and Elizabeth worked with Michelle Martinat, Schoolyard Improvement Project Manager in Facilities, to structure and plan the program which is in its third year of existence. The goal of Champions is to support science learning in outdoor spaces and to help students make a connection with the earth. Molly and Elizabeth were both teachers in the district. Molly primarily supports teachers in K0/K1 to grade 2 and Elizabeth supports teachers in grades 3 to 5. Michelle's background is in landscape architecture and gardening, and she also was a teacher. Each one brings a wealth of knowledge, experience, and enthusiasm to the project.

About thirty schools are in the program, with approximately forty teachers participating each year. Originally focused on K-8 schools, they expanded the criteria to include K-12 because many secondary teachers were interested in being part of the program. Elizabeth and Molly said that many teachers had already been integrating outdoor learning into their lessons and were interested in learning new strategies and ideas for this work. Some were also interested in improving their gardening skills. All were excited about coming together with other teachers who share the same goals. Elizabeth and Molly said that growing a community of Boston teachers who have the same ideas about outside learning is an important part of the program.

Champions was originally funded by a federal grant from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) program which was created to help schools after the pandemic. The grant funded the first two years of the program and was used to provide stipends for teachers and resources for outdoor learning. When grant funding expired, the program has continued with funding from the Science Department, but they have had to scale down teacher stipends and modify the frequency of the professional development.

Professional development is at the core of this program. Elizabeth and Molly plan each session around teacher interests and needs. Teachers meet approximately six times a year, sometimes at the Campbell Resource Center, where their offices are. Sessions also take place at different schools, giving teachers a chance to see other outdoor spaces and learn about the work being done there. For example, they learned about seed stratification at the Curley School and at the Hennigan School, they learned how they are using the outdoors to foster mindfulness. Some sessions have taken place at the locations of BPS partners. At the Arnold Arboretum teachers observed nocturnal animals during a night walk. They visited the Dudley Greenhouse and Food Project and toured their farm. At Haley House they learned how they support the Mel King School's community. Many schools have a partner garden funded through Green City Growers or City Sprouts. Both programs assign a farmer to each school who helps with building and maintaining the garden and provides in-school programming as well. Boston Nature Center, Speak for the Trees, and Friends of the Boston Schoolyards are also partners.

Sessions often begin with a presentation by a partner about how they support Boston schools. The second half provides an opportunity for teachers to network and meet in project-based groups around common interests. Groups have focused on planning for BPS Learns Outdoors Week, developing a seasonal growing calendar that BPS schools could use, and creating curricular connections that integrate different subject areas into lessons. During this school year, some teacher champions chose a topic of interest to them and planned and facilitated a session. Teachers who take on leadership roles have the opportunity to earn academic ladder credits.

During one session at East Boston EEC last spring, the city's Office of Green Infrastructure did a presentation on how stormwater can be captured with rain gardens and described the planning, designing, and installation process. They also explained how rain barrels can be used to collect stormwater for reuse in gardens. Teachers were able to visit the school's rain garden and see slides of the garden installation event. Charles River Water Conservancy also did a presentation on the work they do to make the Charles River and its parks a network of natural urban places that invite engagement. They described the STEAM activity kits they have created for students to enable them to create their own floating wetlands. Teachers came away with content knowledge, practical tips, an understanding of the resources available to them in the community, and the ideas and information that resulted from networking and problem solving with other champions.

Molly and Elizabeth agree that working with this community of teachers is the highlight of the work they do. Molly said that the teachers all have the mindset that their students will learn best when they are outdoors connecting with the Earth. She finds this very fulfilling and it makes her optimistic for the future. Elizabeth added that it allows them to bridge their passions: science, the outdoors, and planning and leading professional development for teachers. She has a love of children's literature and is excited to find and share good books with teachers. It was a pleasure to meet with Elizabeth and Molly. We came away inspired by these two educators and the work they are doing with teachers and the impact it has on students.