

# **Abby Plummer**

## **2021 Maine Agriculture in the Classroom**

### **Teacher of the Year**

Abby Plummer, a fifth-grade teacher at Edna Drinkwater School in Northport has been named the 2021 Maine Agriculture in the Classroom Teacher of the Year.

Abby first became involved in farm-based education in 2010. She started going to Farm to School Conferences, visiting school gardens and educational farms, and even traveled to California to the Edible Schoolyard and the Center for Eco-literacy. Abby wanted to gain more experience, so she and her husband enrolled in a MOFGA Apprenticeship at Morning Dew Farm in Newcastle. Her mentor farmers introduced her to the Farm to School organization FARMS (Focus on Agriculture in Rural Maine Schools), where she started volunteering. Soon a position was developed on her behalf in collaboration with the Rising Tide Co-op and the Morris Farm Trust.

Abby learned about grants offered through Maine Agriculture in the Classroom and wrote her first grant in 2011 to support a Farm to School Coordinator position, and another in 2013. These grants expanded FARMS into another district and increase the work from cooking and taste tests to implementing and managing school gardens and establishing procurement from local farms into school cafeterias in 7 different schools in 2 districts. After managing Farm to School programs for five years, Abby saw the benefits to students, families, schools, *and* farmers. She frequently heard from families that their child or younger sibling had come home from school begging to make parsnip or kale chips or rutabaga fries, insisting on going to the farmers' market! Cafeteria staff were grateful for the calls she made to local farms to find out about availability. Abby collaborated with school counselors on a program for at-risk elementary students where they worked in the gardens and visited local farms. Teachers who were feeling overwhelmed with curriculum mandates, were thrilled to have help integrating the program into the standards.

Through these experiences, her passion to *prove* the value of farm-based education grew. Abby decided that if she became a classroom teacher, really make a difference. She could apply the learning rationale that she believes is crucial to inspiring our youth to become valuable members in sustainable community development. Abby discovered that College of the Atlantic had a master's degree in which she could study Sustainable Food Systems and Education, while receiving her K-8 teaching certification. While there, she did a practicum at Troy Howard Middle School's garden program and directed COA's Farm to School partnership. For her thesis research Abby designed and implemented *Growing Season*, a farm-based summer learning program for middle school students, at one of COA's farms. After this, she transitioned into the classroom as a 5th grade teacher at the Edna Drinkwater School. While there she has collaborated with Tanglewood 4-H Camp, Belfast Bay Watershed Coalition, and WeatherBlur (Maine Math and Science Alliance) to provide experiential learning for her students relating to the sustainability of Maine natural resources.

Abby is an incredibly talented teacher who infuses agricultural concepts into every aspect of her classroom in many creative ways. The result is an exciting, engaging, and rigorous curriculum for all

her students, no matter their individual learning styles. She also contributes to the professional development of her peers by presenting at numerous conferences and co-authoring an article in a scholarly publication.

She has integrated agriculture in writing projects in every genre: poetry and figurative language grows out of observing plants; persuasive, argumentative, and letter writing is developed while convincing the principal and the school board to support a solar installation, two expansions of the garden, proposed improvements to the composting program; fiction styles are learned as students interview farmers and producers at the Common Ground Country Fair and then imagine those lives as their own; and, research writing grows as they delve deeply into any number of topics that grow out of their work in the greenhouse and garden. Mathematics: How much soil do we need to fill the new raised beds? How many garlic bulbs can we fit into one bed? What are the financial benefits of running a farm stand? How many bulbs do we need, and at what cost, to plant in front of the entire school? How many carrots do we need to make carrot cake for the entire school? Science: a seed saving program, citizen science investigating microplastics in our local waters with WeatherBlur, decomposition competitions to improve the composting system, plant growth experiments; collaboration with Tanglewood 4-H Learning Center on many investigations and a 2-night canoeing and camping trip to High Island involving a clean-up of the entire island. The list goes on and on; Abby has tied agriculture and natural resources into virtually every concept she teaches!

The pandemic has not slowed Abby down one bit. She continues to integrate the garden, greenhouse, and nature into many of her lessons and give her students many experiences while learning remotely. A sampling includes: a Sun Advertisement project to integrate with art and teach the role of the sun in the food chain, watershed, and all life on earth; a Math in Nature Scavenger Hunt using geometry to incorporate observational drawings; a Physical Properties in Nature scavenger hunt; and multiple videos of activity in the garden and greenhouse to support concepts she's teaching. The increased benefit of teaching outside puts Abby right in her element and the students couldn't be more pleased!

Students sign up in droves to participate in the after school and summer programs before and after going through her classroom. Many students join because they just want to hang around her, others join because of the chance to get their hands dirty working the soil, and others because they enjoy the business aspects of running the farm stand. She instills a lifelong interest in all that a garden offers to a family and a community.

Abby says, "For ten years, I have learned from and collaborated with a vast array of teachers, food service staff, organizations, families, and farmers. I am so lucky to be able to teach at Drinkwater, where the authentic, farm-based teaching practices I developed while at COA are fully supported by the administration, school board, and community. Our students have taught me the most: these young activists believe in composting, seed saving, soil health, eating and cooking fresh from the garden, buying from local farms, and caring for all living things; they truly give me hope for the future of Maine agriculture. Thank you again to MAITC for the many years you have helped make this possible for us all; the honor of receiving Maine Ag in the Classroom's Teacher of the Year has brought my ten-year career in farm-based education to a complete circle, and I am grateful for your recognition."