

# PROVIDENCE Journal

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Entertainment & Life

## **At Meeting Street, garden is a source of food and learning**

**By Scott Turner / Special to The Journal**

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Four years ago, art teacher Paul Connelly began a program to incorporate growing food into the art curriculum. Gardening branched out to become part of a Meeting Street education, from physical and speech therapy to literacy to science.

On a bright summer morning, staffers take three middle-school students in wheelchairs outside to raised garden beds on the grounds of Meeting Street in Providence.

A girl uses her eyes to communicate to a staff member to help her push tiny chive seeds into a soil tray. A boy uses a head nod to let a teacher know that he is fine with picking mint. Meanwhile, a classmate offers a soft “yes” to an offer to use a small pump sprayer, modified by art teacher and garden creator Paul Connelly to allow the students to water plants.

Meeting Street was founded in 1946, providing some of the nation’s first educational and therapeutic opportunities for children with disabilities. Today, Meeting Street schools educate and help more than 4,000 children with and without special needs from preschool through high school.

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Gardening, said Connelly, is a good way to get students outside. “It is sensory, particularly touch, smell and taste.”

As part of the science curriculum, for example, some classes will plant, water and transplant corn, oat, pea and bean seeds, watering the raised beds and helping with the harvest. "It's wonderful to watch kids participate," Connelly said. In June, "they picked and tasted strawberries grown by their own hands."

At present, the beds host mostly warm-season crops such as basil, dill, fennel, parsley, thyme, melon, beans, cucumbers, sunflowers, tomatoes, even corn. Connelly and students hold weekly tastings. These sometimes involve adjustments, such as pureeing items for students who consume only liquids, or simply smelling for children who need feeding tubes. Otherwise, produce is harvested and eaten in the cafeteria or used as ingredients in recipes.

Inside, Connelly's classroom displays how some students combine art and gardening into expression, with blossoms, painted and quilted, adorning the windows.

It is in that classroom that Connelly meets four high school students and their teachers. The students have arrived to pour honey, previously scooped and filtered from the school's beehive, into jars to be sold at a school fundraiser.

With the help of teachers and aides, the four transfer the syrupy, golden brown liquid from a large jar into several smaller ones. "This activity involves grasping, pouring, turning lids and other therapy goals," Connelly said. Students also prepare labels, involving the transfer of letters onto paper.

Nicholas Andrade, 16, is the only student in the room who can close a jar unassisted. Using an iPad to aid his communication, Nicholas types in "all done," when a jar lid is screwed tightly. Then he licks his fingers, offering an "mmm."

Gardening leads to all sorts of amazements, Connelly said. One math-averse youngster now counts one to five, while watering each bed. Another student, who wouldn't sip from a water bottle, loves drinking water from a hose. One child thought to loathe vegetables ate fresh-picked green beans. A girl afraid of bees chose to touch one. A boy who ate only bologna and cheese sandwiches tasted a radish.

In the Meeting Street community, gardening adds another layer of insight and understanding, said John Kelly, president.

“Through gardening, students become part of one community inside and outside. Students constantly demonstrate that it’s not about disability but about ability. Their gifts come in different shapes and sizes. We learn from them all the time.”