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Community Engagement

Peppers are starting to sprout under the overhead lights at O.V. Jewitt Community School, and Grade 7 to 8 students look forward to watching more plants grow this spring.

“I really like planting plants. I like checking up on them every couple of days,” says 14-year-old Charlotte, a member of the garden club.

Daniel Camaclang, 38, created the garden club last year because he noticed students wanted to learn about climate change in a more tangible way.

Two-thirds of Manitobans say they believe in climate change according to a Probe Research poll. Many young Winnipeggers view climate change as a human-caused issue, and climate education is becoming more prevalent across classrooms.

As climate change discourse ramps up, more youth fear environmental doom. In 2023, 80 per cent of children in Canada and the United States experienced eco-anxiety, according to an Earth Rangers summary report.

Some climate education programs in Winnipeg are trading eco-anxiety for eco-action.

Camaclang uses eco-anxiety as a motivator for the garden club. “I think that’s why I value this work with the students and encourage leadership in this area,” says the Learning Support teacher. “It’s been surprisingly easy to engage kids with plants, something that kids are definitely interested in.”

Last spring, students started to grow somewhere between 200 to 300 plants, which later became distributed amongst their families. This patient gardening process helped students understand there’s more than imported food to be dependent on, and it’s possible to grow food close to home.

“All those plants were gone within 15 minutes,” says Camaclang, “we realized quickly there was an interest in this.”

This year, students will help execute a plant sale. Plants will cost somewhere between 50 cents to one dollar.

A core group of five students lead the club and check in on the plants at lunch time. Oftentimes friends bring friends, and the garden club can have 20 to 25 students dropping in to help with various tasks. They water the vegetation, transfer plants into bigger pots and place the herbs in the sun.

High school students are channelling their eco-anxiety into games.

Joining climate education programs with like-minded goals have helped ease environmental fears. “Eco-anxiety is definitely a big thing,” says 15-year-old Ruhani, “but I feel like more than the problem of us feeling eco-anxiety is the fact that a lot of people don’t even think about it.”

Ruhani is one of five high schoolers involved in the Youth Climate Alliance Program at the Manitoba Museum. The program’s third cohort is making a giant board game that will be set up at the museum just in time for Earth Day weekend on Apr. 20 from 10:30 to 3:30 p.m.

The game is inspired by the *Game of Life* and is meant to show youth how plastic impacts animals. While playing, kids will receive different action cards which lead them to educational mini games. Information booths will also be included.

Mika Pineda, 26, started this afterschool program back in Mar. 2023. While GenAction initiative delivers reliable science content and provides the framework, it’s up to Pineda to tie climate lessons to Manitoba.

Pineda gets members to think about how climate change is being viewed and she discusses the phenomenon’s direct impacts, like the unusually warm and dry winter Manitobans recently experienced.

“For me, climate anxiety happened to me this winter, because I realized the first months of the winter season it was not snowing,” says 16-year-old Arwen. “It’s just kind of a reminder that everyone has their own parts to do to prevent climate change.”

The team meets every second week but as the event edges closer they plan to meet a couple times a week as needed. Pineda guides the group as they dive into topics that interest them.

“A lot of their content is based on their own research,” says Pineda, “I’ll show them videos about it, but the more in-depth research is coming from their own research. I’ll just have to fact check it after.”

Semira, 17, has been a part of two of the three cohorts. A couple weeks after Semira first joined the program, she felt more confident to take on new initiatives. She noticed her school had a nice courtyard, so she organized a compost there to help reduce waste.

The program has helped push Semira into action, and she says: “I just felt more like ‘okay, I can do this.’ I felt a bit more credible with what I’m talking about.”

Whether it’s through games or gardens, young Manitobans are becoming invested in climate education programs. Meanwhile, kids wait for other plants to make their appearance.