

# green schoolyards

FOR HEALTHY  
COMMUNITIES



Photo: John Fisher

## GOALS:

These are the goals of the Santa Cruz City Schools (SCCS):

- > All SCCS students will be prepared to successfully access post-secondary college and career opportunities.
- > SCCS will create positive, engaging school environments that promote the development of cognitive skills and

the social emotional well-being of all students.

- > We will eliminate the achievement gaps that currently exist between demographic groups within the SCCS student community.
- > We will develop a highly collaborative, professional culture focused on supporting effective teaching.

## CASE STUDY:

### Life Lab, Westlake Elementary School, Santa Cruz City Schools California

## MISSION:

The mission of the Santa Cruz City Schools is to create and support a learning environment that challenges and enables students to achieve their highest potentials.

- > SCCS will maintain a balanced budget and efficient and effective management.
- > SCCS will maintain strong communication and partnerships with its diverse community.

The Life Lab program enhances and supports the achievement of these goals.



## OVERVIEW

**Santa Cruz City Schools (SCCS)** serve kindergarten through high school students in Santa Cruz, California. Students in all four elementary schools, K - 5, experience science hands-on in their garden-based Life Lab science programs with funding support largely from what is called a parcel tax on local properties. What is most unique about these outdoor classrooms and green schoolyards, including their garden areas, is this funding source. Some of the parcel tax funds are used to compensate an Instructional Specialist for the Life Lab program at each of the four schools. Jane Forbes is the Instructional Specialist at one of the four elementary schools in the district, Westlake Elementary. She has been working with this kind of hands-on outdoor learning program in the garden for the past 15 years. For the first several

years, working part-time, with no benefits, was a challenge despite how rewarding it was to bring these kinds of experiences to young children. Feeling strongly about the value to children, Jane and a group of parents, educators and nature-based learning advocates made a presentation to the school board to request additional support. The school board members said they valued the program but did not have the funding for it. They suggested that the group apply to the local parcel tax commission to see if funding to improve elementary education might be obtained. In the first application to the commission, Jane made the presentation. The proposal itself, was developed with the input and leadership of many local parents. The proposal was supported with letters and petitions from parents and teachers from all

four elementary schools. It also contained quotes from students and case studies about the benefits of outdoor, hands-on learning for students. In fact, every step in this process through the past 15 years, has had the dynamic support and volunteerism of local parents and others. The school administration is supportive as well. The Instructional Specialists for Life Lab do now receive benefits. Importantly, the first time the parcel tax funding was approved, it was for an eight-year cycle. In 2016, another parcel tax proposal was approved, providing the funding for the Life Lab projects and other worthwhile efforts to improve elementary and secondary education in Santa Cruz City Schools for another eight years.

## THE WORK

Life Lab lessons incorporate California Science standards, environmental awareness, and nutrition education in engaging students to actively learn in their nature-based outdoor classrooms. The garden-based learning at each of the four elementary schools is similar, with differences unique to each school population. At Westlake, the school garden is behind the multipurpose room and a short walk for the kindergarten students. The K-1 students come outside to their garden learning environment each week for 25 minutes at a time, an approach that works well for them. The students in grades 2 through five come out for their garden-based learning two times each month for 50 minutes at a time.

## FUNDING

The new parcel tax funding for the period from July 2016 to June 2024 generates \$105 per year per parcel in the elementary district, totalling \$1,661,100. The funds are used for Grade K-3 class size reduction, smaller class sizes in grades 4-6, library services, art supplies, Life Lab, and a variety of other K-6 programs. In addition to the parcel tax funds that help to compensate the Life Lab Instructional Specialists, the Westlake Life Lab is supported by several groups including the Westlake PTA, Westlake Site Council, Life Lab Plant Sale, grants, and community and parent donations. Similarly diverse groups help to supplement the parcel tax funding at the three other elementary schools. Most of all, they love what they do, and the results they see with the children they serve.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- > Parent and community involvement is key to the success of outdoor classrooms, gardens and nature-based learning environments.
- > Administration and faculty must be supportive as well.
- > There are sometimes surprising opportunities for funding sources, so don't be afraid to try a new approach.



**Other partners involved in this program:**  
At Westlake Elementary, additional partners are the Westlake PTA and Westlake Site Council.



## WHO IS SERVED

The children who are provided this outdoor, nature-based, experiential and hands-on approach to learning science and other subjects are the primary beneficiaries. The broader community is served as well, inspired and heartened by the enthusiasm for learning that parents, educators, and other community members see when the students are participating in Life Lab activities.

## ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Life Lab program is flourishing at four elementary schools in Santa Cruz City Schools, and eight more years of funding through the parcel tax has been secured, taking the program to June of 2024.



*I believe strongly in the many benefits that garden programs bring to students. One of our many successes is seeing children try something for the first time!*

—Jane Forbes,  
Instructional Specialist, Life Lab,  
Westlake Elementary School,  
SCCS



See [www.sccs.net/community/bond\\_measures\\_parcel\\_taxes](http://www.sccs.net/community/bond_measures_parcel_taxes) for information about the tax and [www.sccs.net/schools/district\\_programs-life-lab](http://www.sccs.net/schools/district_programs-life-lab) for additional information about the Life Lab programs at the elementary schools.