

Massachusetts Avenue Project: Urban Farming and Job Skills for Youth

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What is the Massachusetts Avenue Project?

Massachusetts Avenue Project (“MAP”) seeks to make food systems more local and inclusive. MAP nurtures the growth of a diverse and equitable community food system to promote local economic opportunities, access to affordable and nutritious food, and social-change education.¹ MAP grows fresh produce on its urban farm on the West Side of Buffalo. Annually, MAP employs roughly 50 at-risk youth to transform the community’s food system.² The programs reflect the vital role food can have in supporting local economies and building social capital.³

How does MAP help fight poverty?

MAP helps fight poverty by employing at-risk youth and by providing affordable and accessible fresh food to low-income neighborhoods. MAP

founded Growing Green (“GG”), a youth program, to address the growing land vacancy, high youth unemployment and food security needs of the community.⁴ MAP’s urban farm and mobile food market make fresh food accessible to low-income neighborhoods, educating residents on the importance of buying healthy, fresh, pesticide-free foods. All profits go to support youth development and urban agriculture in Buffalo.⁵

What are the links of nutrition and poverty?

Low-income people face nutrition and health challenges such as hunger, limited access to healthy and affordable foods, and limited opportunities for physical activity.⁶ Many children in poverty do not get the proper vitamins and nutrition from their food. This affects brain function and leads to poor educational performance.⁷

What is the Growing Green Program?

Growing Green Program is a youth development and urban agriculture program to increase healthy food access and improve our communities.⁸ GG aims to positively transform the food system in low income neighborhoods, as well as provide young residents with life-long skills and employment opportunities.⁹

In 2010, MAP trained about 50 youth.¹⁰ Students apply through the City’s employment and training program, and some get placed in MAP.¹¹ There is a waiting list of students each year. Participants represent a diverse group of youth, largely from Buffalo’s West Side. The average participant is 16 years old.¹²

What projects do the Growing Green youth work on?

All youth work on the urban farm to grow food. In addition, they are split into three job teams: (1) mobile market, (2) Growing Green Works Youth Enterprise (GGWYE), and (3) community education policy and development.¹³

What is the Growing Green Urban Farm?

It consists of 13 lots, covering over an acre of reclaimed vacant lots in a residential neighborhood on Buffalo's West Side. The farm features

- a 1200 gallon rain water catchment system,
- floral and perennial garden beds,
- 3 greenhouses,
- urban chickens,
- a vermiculture composting system, and
- multiple aquaponic systems that raise fish and plants in a symbiotic system.¹⁴

The urban farm serves as a food production farm and a hands-on training and education site for the GG employees. The food grown here supplies the Mobile Market, is sold to local restaurants, and is used in youth cooking classes.¹⁵

What type of work is performed at the Urban Farm?

The youth work on nearly every aspect of the farm operation, including composting, raising chickens, growing vegetables, seedling care, and farm planning. While contributing significantly via labor and energy to the farm, the youth are receiving valuable job experience in the modern green economy.¹⁶

What is the Mobile Market?

Every week during the growing season the Mobile Market is brought to “food deserts:” low-income neighborhoods that have limited access to fresh food, within the City of Buffalo.¹⁷ The produce is from MAP’s urban farm and other local farms.¹⁸ The food is sold at discount prices making this produce affordable for low-income communities. Clients can use EBT and food stamp benefits.

What sort of community education and policy work do the youth work on?

Youth work alongside MAP staff to create marketing and education materials for the organization. While learning value skills and utilizing creativity, social media tools and art skills, youth are getting the word out about the local food revolution. GG youth sit on the Steering Committee for the Healthy Kids, Healthy Communities Coalition and are leaders in a city-wide Youth Advisory Council – working on issues of healthy food access at schools, improving public transportation options for youth and creating healthier neighborhoods. Student leaders have also participated in the process to draft a new land use and zoning code as part of the City of Buffalo’s Green Code Community Planning meetings.

What is Growing Green Works?

Growing Green Works Youth Enterprise (GGWYE) is managed and run by urban youth as part of the Growing Green Program. Youth develop and market organic value-added products as a way to understand and connect to the food system and the local economy. The products sold include:

- Amazing Chili Starter,
- Super Duper Salsa and
- Raspberry Apple Vinaigrette.

The products are available at over 25 different location including Wegmans, Premier Gourmet, Guercio & Sons, and many seasonal farmers markets.

How do the youth’s activities in GGWYE translate to skills that help youth escape poverty?

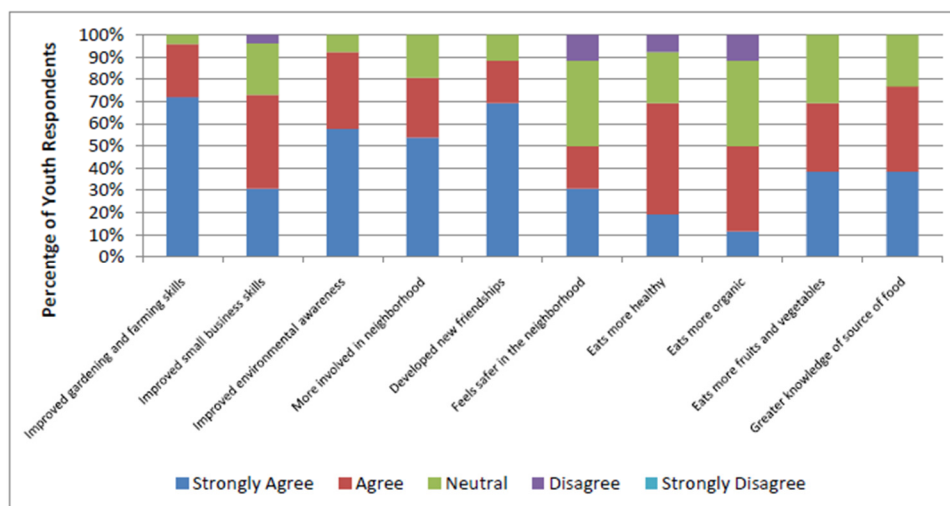
It is an economic education program for youth, giving them hands-on business and leadership training by operating their own social enterprise.¹⁹

As part of their training, youth learn how decision-making happens in a business management setting and meet with local farmers and retail business owners. They also learn business planning, marketing, sales and accounting.²⁰

What are the benefits to youth from Growing Green?

During an open ended interview of the 2010 youth participants the youth reported a high level of satisfaction with the program. The program impacts their overall understanding of the food system and empowers them to advocate for change in the food system. It helps them identify their strengths and build from them. The youth’s responses are reported in Figure 1.²¹

Benefits to Youth from Participation in Growing Green (Figure 1)²²



In 2011, a total of 49 at-risk teens were employed and trained in urban food system development including learning about nutrition, growing organic produce, preparing healthy meals and distributing good to the community. 94% of youth completed all program training components and gained new knowledge and skills in urban agriculture.²³ Perhaps most impressively, during the past four years, all high school seniors participating in Growing Green have graduated and gone to college.²⁴

What are some special challenges of working with kids living in poverty?

There are many challenges. One is the public's attitude toward students from a disadvantaged background: often people treat youth in poverty simply as needing help. We need to look at and improve the students' strengths and remember what they have to offer, instead of simply offering charity.²⁵

By learning from each other, we challenge youth to recognize their role in community and to use their talents to positively impact their world.²⁶

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- ¹ <http://www.mass-ave.org/>
 - ² “Buffalo Grown” p.11, Samina Raja, PhD. 2011
 - ³ <http://www.mass-ave.org/>
 - ⁴ <http://www.mass-ave.org/>
 - ⁵ <http://www.mass-ave.org/>
 - ⁶ <http://frac.org/initiatives/hunger-and-obesity/>
 - ⁷ PPG Radio Interview with Zoe Hollomon
 - ⁸ <http://mass-ave.org/?p=562>
 - ⁹ “Buffalo Grown” p. 11
 - ¹⁰ “Buffalo Grown” p.3
 - ¹¹ Phone Interview with Diane 3/28
 - ¹² “Buffalo Grown” p. 14
 - ¹³ Id. at 11
 - ¹⁴ <http://www.mass-ave.org/>
 - ¹⁵ Id.
 - ¹⁶ Id.
 - ¹⁷ “Buffalo Grown” p. 3
 - ¹⁸ PPG Radio Interview with Zoe Hollomon
 - ¹⁹ <http://www.mass-ave.org/>
 - ²⁰ Id.
 - ²¹ “Buffalo Grown” p.15
 - ²² Id.
 - ²³ Phone interview with Diane 3/28
 - ²⁴ Phone interview with Diane 3/28
 - ²⁵ Id.
 - ²⁶ <http://www.mass-ave.org/>

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