



Los Alamos Public Schools

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PRESS RELEASE

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Sabina Johns Provides Hands-on Science in the Greenhouse.



Sabina Johns helps elementary students learn hands on science in the greenhouse

Every day at recess special education teacher Sabina Johns works in the greenhouse on the Chamisa Elementary School playground.

And every day the small dome-shaped space is bursting with life, and full of at least 8-10 kids eager to do different jobs like feed the fish, planting, transplanting and harvesting.

The kids aren't there as part of a class, and they're not in an organized club. They choose to

come because the greenhouse is just as entertaining as the playground. Maybe more.

What do they do? They go to the fish pond and watch the fish. They water the tiny tomato plants that the students grew from seeds and are getting ready to sell. They bring buckets of scraps from the cafeteria and grind up apple cores and other scraps to feed to the worms in the compost heap.

"I had an inkling of how important this was when the kids saw the cherry tomato plant and they all wanted to eat one. They are willing to try everything that they see growing in here," said Johns, who also works on an organic farm during the summer and used to work at a

biodynamic farm out east where kids from New York and Boston would come to do farm work. "They are so excited to be working, because it is such an active experience."



Right now, her students are harvesting vegetables like lettuce, beets and broccoli rabe, and making enormous salads. Johns said, "They just love it. They eat all the salad."

The garden spills out onto the playground, where a hay bale garden circles the back of the greenhouse. "I just found out about hay bale gardening a few weeks ago," said Johns, who thought it would be more practical than building raised beds.

Before they can plant anything in the hay bales, they have to let the straw decompose and dig out the center so they can get in the soil. The fourth graders will graph the temperature of the bales to find out when they will be ready.

Chamisa Elementary was able to put in the greenhouse because a family made a donation to the Los Alamos Public Schools Foundation that allowed each school in the district to receive \$10,000 to use for hands-on science.

So far the greenhouse has given students countless opportunities to learn science by doing.



- Students drilled in the hooks near the door and used the cider press in the fall. Doing things like that teaches them about simple machines like inclined planes.

- Instead of looking at an illustration in a book, students can learn about the water cycle whenever they walk in the hot greenhouse and see the water collecting on the walls. They learn about life cycles and the process of decomposition when they work with the compost heap, and see the worms and snails.
- They research the plants that grow and learn about their growing seasons. The sixth graders are studying ancient cultures, and they will have the opportunity to plant the kinds of grains that people grew centuries ago.
- Johns' special education students were able to take a leadership role doing projects, giving tours and showing younger students around the greenhouse.
- Kids go to the greenhouse for language arts where they write poetry and have a quiet place to reflect.
- They learn to plan ahead and work together by keeping logs and records of the work that they do every day.
- "Their powers of observation are honed," said Johns. "They get to experiment and see what happens. Also, they learn how to follow things through. If they don't do something, the plants will wilt."



Johns is retiring this year, but plans to come back often next year to volunteer in the greenhouse help other teacher come up with more ideas on how to use the greenhouse to teach science.

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