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Press Release

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Literacy Garden Breathes Fresh Air into Science for Students in Azusa Unified's Program for the Visually Impaired

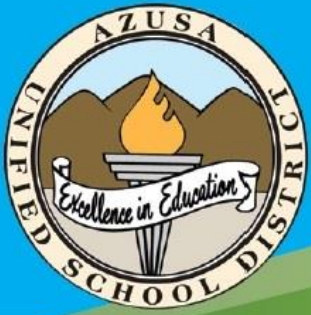
Azusa, CA - With shovels, dirty hands and the help of teacher Diana Dennis, Azusa Unified School District's visually impaired and blind students are learning the science of plants with a newly renovated Literacy Garden at Valleydale Elementary School.

Hauling soil, seeds and gloves from her car to the classroom is a routine the first-year Azusa Unified teacher adopted during the fall semester. As a teacher of visually impaired and blind students between first and fifth grade, her goal is to help them be active learners and thinkers through hands-on outdoor activities – specifically through the Literacy Garden.

"I feel that gardening offers a unique hands-on learning experience for my students," Dennis said. "The students need these kinds of learning-by-doing experiences in order to build knowledge and support their concept development."

When Dennis first arrived on campus last summer, the existing garden space was in need of attention after the dry, summer months. Dennis saw it as an opportunity to give the garden new life while creating a living classroom that kinesthetically teaches students about science and gardening simultaneously.

Utilizing lesson plans from the American Printing House for the Blind, Dennis enlists the assistance of sighted peers to work alongside her students in the Literacy Garden. During the fall semester, students focused on learning about the process of plant growth, the maintenance required to produce flourishing plants and the difference in growth based on soil composition.



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“For the visually impaired and blind students, it can be difficult to understand what people with sight can see and how things appear from different angles and vice versa,” Dennis said.

“Listening to the directions and observations of sighted students, the visually impaired and blind students receive a deeper understanding of the lesson.”

Dennis was recently recognized by the California Retired Teachers Association (CalRTA) for her work with the Literacy Garden, receiving a grant for creating a dynamic classroom experience that engages students in creative ways.

“CalRTA reaches out to support current teachers because we've been there,” CalRTA Director of Communications Debbie Pate-Newberry said. “We know it can be tough. We support teachers, their students and the entire education community.”

Due to increased interest, a waiting list has been created to ensure that all students have the opportunity to work in the garden. Dennis hopes to host an outdoor library where students will be able to check out books and study in a natural environment.

“Through the literacy garden, Ms. Dennis has created an innovative approach to student learning that is making a significant difference in the lives of our students,” Superintendent Linda Kaminski said. “Finding and implementing creative ways for students to learn is what can make all the difference in the growth of a child, and Dennis is doing just that.”

Photos

LitGarden1: Valleydale Elementary School students water newly planted seeds in their Literacy Garden on Nov. 17, 2016, a program orchestrated by teacher Diana Dennis for visually and blind students.

LitGarden2: Diana Dennis teaches her students about plant growth in the Valleydale Elementary School’s Literacy Garden on Nov. 17, 2016.

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