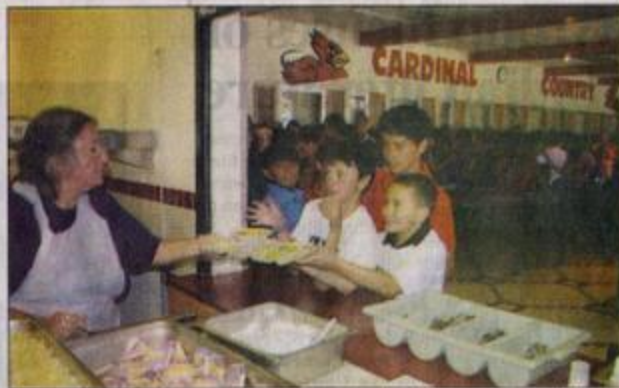


Michaela Vigil-Lujan is framed by the greenery in the cornfield behind Memorial Middle School's greenhouse. Vigil-Lujan and her classmates picked corn; other students will process the vegetables that will be served in the cafeteria.



Nadine Sandoval serves lunch to an excited and hungry crowd at Memorial Middle School. The lunch included calabacitas made from vegetables harvested by the students.



Ernest Mondragon serves up calabacitas at the Memorial Middle School cafeteria. Students harvested and prepared the green chile, squash and corn from the school's "teaching" garden.

Photos by Don Pace Las Vegas Optic



Peter Skelton, assistant professor at New Mexico State University and director of the Memorial Middle School Ag Extension and Education Center, takes his turn at dicing squash for some tasty calabacitas that will be served to the student body.



Noel Griego, Danielle Encinas, teacher April Ortiz, Connor Houdek, Arianna Romero and Carlos Romero talk about the most important part of shucking corn—removing bugs and worms.



Memorial Middle School students Danielle Encinas, Connor Houdek and social studies-home economics teacher April Ortiz get to work shucking a small mountain of corn, which is one of the ingredients for calabacitas that will be cooked up by cafeteria cooks. For more on Memorial's project, see Page B6.

# 'Really on to something special'

By Don Pace Las Vegas Optic

As he begins his fifth year at Memorial Middle School, Peter Skelton, assistant professor and director of the school's Ag Extension and Education Center, told the Las Vegas City schools board that there is not another program like it in the state or the nation.

"I think we're really on to something special," said Skelton, an assistant professor with New Mexico State University. "This is an innovative model, and we've published our third manuscript in the Journal of Extension Education magazine. We are working on a fourth."

He said New Mexico State University and Memorial Middle School have created a unique partnership.

"We're not aware of a program where a university professor is embedded in a public school operating a center like this. Certainly there are some models that are similar and where students are doing some basic gardening. But we've got a small farm and a greenhouse for teaching purposes. We know of nothing like this anywhere else."

## Farm-to-plate program at Memorial Middle

Skelton said.

The first year, a greenhouse was built behind the school to support the agricultural aspect of the program. There is also a large garden below the acequia (a community-run irrigation ditch) that flows by the school, and in recent years, a solar panel and wind turbine have been set up to power the greenhouse. The new technology is also used as a teaching tool.

Skelton explained that a typical science class would work on a myriad of experiments using different soils and plants. Math classes go into the field to harvest beans and then figure out the numbers of beans per pod, pods per plant and plants per five-foot section.

"It's a wonderful way to bring in math skills and then bring in some of the science skills," Skelton said.

For the first time, students are harvesting vegetables that will be served in the cafeteria to the entire student body.

Principal Manuel Lucero said students began by planting seeds and tending to the growing plants.

"This is the part of the curriculum

where they get to reap the benefits of their harvest. This will be in addition to the menu we have. Our cafeteria staff will take the corn, squash, and green chile and make calabacitas. It's wonderful, because it's also a cultural meal. We're really excited about it," Lucero said.

Lucero added that many areas of the curriculum are tied into greenhouse operations.

"We even have a first-mod poetry class that is writing poems dealing with the environment, and the learning opportunities are limitless when it comes to math and science," Lucero said.

Health teacher April Ortiz's class was a flurry of activity as students prepared vegetables for the frying pan. Earlier, students from the social studies class had harvested the produce.

"When the kids get to do hands-on projects and see the seeds they plant grow into eatable foods, it teaches them that they can have their own garden at home. We're excited because this year the whole school is going to eat what they've planted — it has always been just the

health classes. We are letting the kids do the work, so they can appreciate what's out there, it's awesome," Ortiz said.

Student Noel Griego said she and her classmates were having fun while learning.

"We cooked chile and that was fun. When we did the corn and found worms, we named the worms," Griego said, laughing.

Skelton said one of the goals of the program was to follow the national initiative and have a farm-to-school program.

"The kids have run through the process of planting from seed, watching the plants grow, harvesting, processing, and it will be in their stomachs during lunchtime on Friday," Skelton said.

Some of the students turned their nose up at the calabacitas on their plate, but Joseph Griego was not one of them.

"Umm they're good," Griego said. Skelton said local farmer Leonard Ludi and Clarence Montoya at the Adelante RC&D (a nonprofit organization seeking to improve economic conditions and natural resources in Northern New Mexico) have been invaluable in helping students produce crops.

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