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*Grow Ohio Valley to Sow Hydroponic Seeds in Schools*

*STEM Program to Bear Fruit -- and Vegetables Too*

By Joselyn King

Some Ohio County school children could be growing lettuce at their school, then consuming it in their school, then consuming it in their cafeterias as part of a new program being offered through Grow Ohio Valley.

The farming and environmental group that seeks to improve both the economy and nutrition in our communities has obtained a grant from the "Try This West Virginia" organization to start hydroponics programs in local schools.

"Try This West Virginia" is a consortium of groups in the state focusing on health and nutrition. Among them are the West Virginia Healthy Kids and Families Coalition, the West Virginia Association of Counties, the WVU Extension Service, the WV Family Resource Networks, the WV Food and Farm Coalition, Wheeling Jesuit University, and PLANTS, LLC.

Grow Ohio Valley will be partnering with Elm Grove Elementary, Wheeling Middle School, the Ohio Valley Alternative School and the WV Northern Community College's culinary arts program on projects to grow plants at the school in water instead of soil, utilizing a special lighting system and supplementing the plants with nutrients.

The advantage is not as much space is needed to grow crops, and they don't attract mosquitoes or have the need to be treated with chemicals, and Grow Ohio Valley spokeswoman Samantha Amberg.

Each school will have its own hydroponic system, and each will be geared to the grade level of the students.

She said Grow Ohio Valley hopes to have the seeds and the equipment to the schools by February 2019.

"It is really economical, but space-wise and risk-wise," Amberg said. "And it's a cool way to get students some hands-on experience with different topics such as engineering and chemistry."

If the nutrient level goes down on the plants, computerized components will text students' phones to tell them.

And the students should be able to taste the fruits of their labor by the time school is out in the spring, according to Amberg.

The first plants tested will be lettuces and leafy greens.

“That is convenient, because they’re really, really healthy for kids to eat,” Amberg said. “Anytime we can make lettuce more fun, we’re going to do it.”

Once the programs are established, participating schools will be able to access federal “Farm to Table” funds, she said. This has already been done by Tucker County Schools.

The money is used by the school district to purchase the food items grown by students, so that they can be served in the cafeteria.

Grow Ohio Valley also sponsors farmer’s markets during the summer months, Amberg said if the students are able to grow enough products, their vegetables could be sold at these markets.

“It would give the students some economic incentive and jobs training,” she said. “They can see it’s a way to make money. And it’s a cool thing, too. It’s fun to watch seeds grow into plants.”

Try This West Virginia is a perfect partner for the project, said Grow Valley Executive Director Ken Peralta.

“Beyond giving financial and support resources, they’re committed to sharing knowledge gleaned in successful programs like this to others throughout the state,” he said.