

School Garden Programs are on the Rise in US Public Elementary Schools, but are Less Common in Schools with Economically Disadvantaged Student Populations



Introduction

School garden programs can increase students' nutrition knowledge, as well as preference for and consumption of fruits and vegetables. Many organizations have developed resource guides to advise schools in the implementation of school garden programs, and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides online links to these resources as well as other technical assistance opportunities, such as the USDA Team Nutrition program. With increasing attention to the importance of providing healthful food options in schools, school garden programs appear to be a promising strategy to improve student access to healthful foods, and to provide students with the knowledge and skills to help them make healthier choices elsewhere. Tracking the prevalence of school garden programs—and examining which types of schools are more likely to provide such programs—can identify where additional efforts are needed to increase the creation and maintenance of school garden programs.

As part of the Bridging the Gap research program, surveys were gathered from administrators at nationally-representative samples of public elementary schools each year between the 2006-07 and 2012-13 school years. Data were weighted to allow for inference to the prevalence of practices in elementary schools nationwide, and analyses controlled for school demographic characteristics.

Key Findings

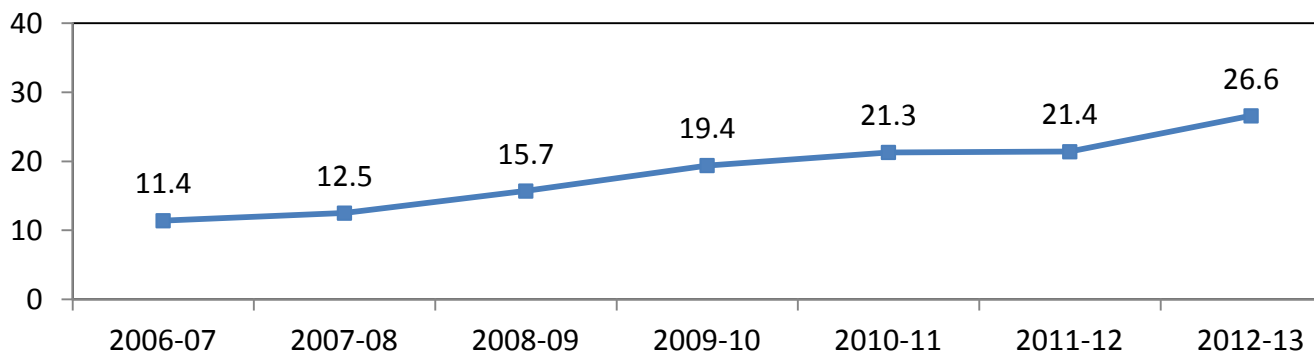
The prevalence of school garden programs at US public elementary schools steadily increased over the past seven years. However, the prevalence of garden programs differed significantly by school characteristics such as region, locale, school size, and student socioeconomic status (SES).

- Gardens were most common at schools in the West, followed by those in the Northeast and South. Gardens were least common at schools in the Midwest.
- Gardens were most common at urban elementary schools and least common at schools in small towns.
- Gardens were less common at schools in which more students were eligible for free or reduced-priced meals (i.e., lower-SES schools).
- Gardens were less common at smaller schools than at larger schools (i.e., those with more than 450 students).

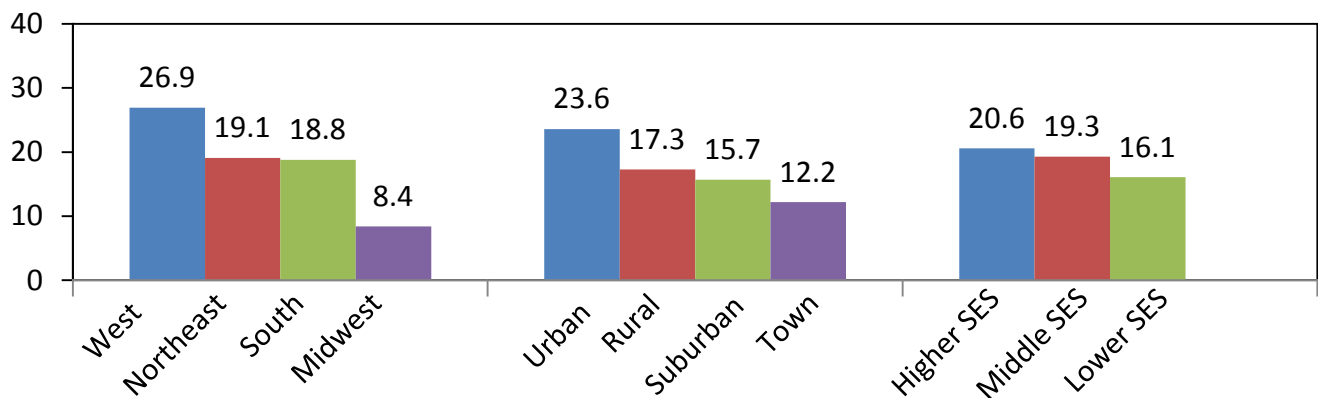
Conclusions and Policy Implications

The percentage of U.S. elementary schools with garden programs has increased substantially over the last seven years, but still three in four US public elementary schools do not have such a program. Garden programs were less common in smaller schools, non-urban schools, schools in the Midwest, and schools serving predominantly lower-SES students. Financial support and technical assistance resources are likely necessary for more schools to implement and maintain school garden programs. The demographic disparities in existing programs indicate that focused efforts may be useful in both increasing the prevalence of elementary-school gardens and reducing disparities across the country.

Percentages of US Public Elementary Schools with Garden Programs



Percentages of US Public Elementary Schools with Garden Programs, by School Characteristics, 2006-07 to 2012-13 School Years



Notes: Socioeconomic status (SES) defined by tertiles, using proportion of students eligible for free/reduced-price meals. Data were weighted to the school level. Percentages are adjusted for school year and other demographic covariates (in multivariable models).

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Suggested Citation: Turner L, Sandoval A, Chaloupka FJ. *School Garden Programs are on the Rise in US Public Elementary Schools, but are Less Common in Schools with Economically Disadvantaged Student Populations - A* BTG Research Brief. Chicago, IL: Bridging the Gap Program, Health Policy Center, Institute for Health Research and Policy, University of Illinois at Chicago; 2014.