

SUCCESS STORY · SCALING THE DIG IN SCHOOLS INITIATIVE

School Gardens Are Growing Across Arizona

This year, Arizona's first DIG in Schools Learning Collaborative reached school gardens in high-need communities and helped a state allocation take root.

REAL NEED

Arizona schools bring remarkable strengths to garden programs: dedicated staff, strong local ties, and deep commitment to local foodways. They also face distinct barriers like arid conditions, short growing seasons, and limited infrastructure. For schools in lower access, rural, and tribal communities, resource constraints and geographic isolation can compound these challenges. In formative work, we found that schools often lack awareness of available resources, capacity, and a simple changemaking framework.

Delivered virtually, DEVELOPING INTEGRATED GARDENS (DIG) IN SCHOOLS is built to address documented needs, helping schools leverage their own assets, capacity, climate, and community. This year, we hosted our first Learning Collaborative (LC) to foster connection, skill-building, and resource sharing.



“I had no idea starting this how many school gardens were out there, how many resources, and how much community involvement there was.”

-LC Participant

THE LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

From February to May 2026, the LC convened six facilitated virtual sessions moving schools through the DIG in Schools Cycle of Change—Till, Sow, Grow, Reap—with guest experts, peer exchange, and recommendations tailored to each school. Each session was offered on two days to fit school schedules.

The Learning Collaborative reached high-need schools across Arizona.

19

Certified DIG
in Schools
Specialists

16

Schools
Represented
from 9 Counties

7,490

Students Served
by Participating
Schools

8 of 16

Schools Were
Rural or Small
Town

10 of 16

Schools Had
≥50% FRPL
Rates*

*FRPL: Free or reduced-price lunch. In addition, 5 schools had ≥ 98% FRPL rates.

The LC cohort included schools with a range of garden programs, from *not yet started* to *established for many years*. All participating schools completed the DIG in Schools Tool to learn more about their program's strengths and areas for improvement across four domains. On average, schools scored highest in domains close to their locus of control—THE GARDEN (56%) and STUDENT EXPERIENCE (51%)—and lowest in domains more dependent on external connections: RESOURCES & SUPPORT (31%) and CULTURE & COMMUNITY (32%). Because the LC was designed to foster connectivity, these findings suggest that participation in itself could help to address gaps in resource access, support networks, and community building.

“A huge issue in farm to school is there's so many people trying to do it, but there's no real way to get everyone connected so we can share advice...[This Collaborative] connected people that are more advanced with people that are just starting.”

-LC Participant

REAL CHANGE

By the final session, participants were already reporting changes to **RESOURCES & SUPPORT** and **CULTURE & COMMUNITY**. They used the DIG in Schools process to develop plans, make new connections, and more:

“DIG in Schools created recommendations based on our unique identified barriers and strengths. This allowed us to **set up step-by-step goals.**”

“We successfully **added school gardening to our district wellness policy** as an acceptable form of physical activity.”

“I’ve reached out to local farmers and others—they **donated soil and tools for students.**”

“**I reached out to Master Gardeners at Extension.** After some ‘digging,’ we found the blueprints for our garden, and for the most part we fixed [the issues together]. I just needed to get outside of the box and ask for help.”

“I learned I didn’t have much community involvement, so I started reaching out to different people and **had a local flower grower come in to teach my students** about her business.”

“**The irrigation specialist guest speaker came out to our school.** I brought ideas from the PTO and our administrator, and he’s [now] mapped out a design that we need to review.”

“One recommendation was to build support, so **we added community members** and now work across different grades to get input and learn how much different people want to be involved.”

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

As the LC progressed, the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) recognized an emergent opportunity to collaborate around a school garden funding allocation. The ADE worked with the DIG in Schools Team to integrate the DIG in Schools Tool and Action Planning Template into their application process, and they quickly identified an eager cohort of eligible schools in the LC participants. In turn, the DIG in Schools Team was able to connect participants with a funding source that allowed them to expand their action plans and implement changes during the 2026-27 school year. Plans include:



YUMA COUNTY

Gary A. Knox Elementary (≥98% FRPL) will improve its already impressive garden by building an outdoor classroom to enhance the student experience.



RURAL COCHISE

Huachuca City School (94% FRPL) will grow its moderately integrated garden to produce more food for students, adding an orchard and new outdoor learning areas.



MARICOPA COUNTY

Maryland Elementary (≥98% FRPL) plans to rebuild its beds and irrigation lines, add classroom hydroponic kits, and fund a partial Garden Educator/Manager stipend.

FROM CONNECTION TO SHARED LEARNING TO NEW FUNDING, ARIZONA'S SCHOOL GARDENS ARE GAINING GROUND—TOGETHER.