

Common Threads Farm

School-Based Food Education Programs

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Organization and Program Overview

Common Threads is a Bellingham, WA based 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that connects kids to healthy food in the garden, in the kitchen, and at the table. We want kids to grow up making food choices that are good for their bodies, their communities, and the environment. We “grow good eaters” because we believe that when kids eat better, they learn better, act better, and feel better.

In our school-based food education programs, Common Threads AmeriCorps Food Educators garden, cook, and eat with over 7000 students at 21 schools across Whatcom County. The program includes 8 lessons in school gardens spread over the fall and spring and 4 cooking lessons in the classroom during the winter. Students are taught gardening and cooking skills and given opportunities to try new healthy foods, both by tasting foods growing in the gardens and by tasting dishes that they prepare together in the classroom.

Some of the distinguishing features of our program model include:

School-based during the school day: this gives all kids access to food education programming, not just those whose parents elect to send them to programs during out of school hours.

Real tools, real recipes: we believe that kids are capable of safely handling cooking tools (including knives) given appropriate instruction and supervision, and that their palates are far more adventurous than adults often give them credit for.

The creativity and passion of AmeriCorps Service Members is a key component of program success: kids respond positively to young adult role models (see Principles of Change, Appendix.)

Intended Impact

Intended impacts identified at the start of this study were:

1. **Kids are able to grow, prepare and recognize healthy food.** Kids will be able to do things such as planting and caring for vegetables in the garden, use common kitchen tools, and follow simple recipes.

2. **Kids develop a joyful, positive, and nourishing relationship with food.** We aim for kids to have positive exposures to and potentially some excitement about new healthy foods through our programs.
3. **Kids develop nutritional literacy.** Kids will recognize healthy food, and know what makes something healthy or not healthy. In particular, they will begin to understand the importance of eating vegetables on health and how their bodies feel.
4. **Kids feel both capable and empowered to make healthy choices for their bodies.** We want kids to see themselves as having agency both in how they treat their bodies and in how hands-on food education grounds them as learners.

See Appendix A for indicators of impact.

Evaluation Methodology

The aim of our evaluation was to see what kind and quality of impact Common Threads' school based-food education program is having on the students we serve in elementary and middle schools across Whatcom County. To understand this, we explored two broad evaluation questions:

1. What kind and quality of impact are we having on students?
2. What aspects of our program are causing this impact?

Over the course of the project, we (a) developed and refined our ideas of intended impact and indicators, (b) designed and implemented a mixed methods outcome evaluation using both qualitative and quantitative means to collect and analyze data, (c) identified themes and findings, and (d) considered the implications to those findings for program improvement and innovation.

This project began by identifying and clarifying the intended impact of Common Threads' school-based food education program. Once the ideas of impact had been developed, we used the Heart Triangle™ model to identify qualitative and quantitative indicators of impact on the mental, behavioral, and emotional changes in our participants. We used these indicators to design a qualitative interview protocol and a quantitative questionnaire to evaluate progress toward achieving our intended impact.

Some of the potential limitations of this study are that (a) we interviewed teachers whose perspective on Common Threads' program impact on their students' lives is necessarily limited to what they observe in their classroom. Teachers are not well positioned to observe or comment on changes in students' attitudes and behaviors towards food in the cafeteria or at home and that (b) our stratified sampling method involved interviewing teachers at two grade levels (2nd and 5th) at four schools. Had we interviewed teachers at every partner school, or across every grade, it's possible that our findings could have been somewhat different.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

For the qualitative portion of the evaluation, we designed an in-depth interview protocol to gain data about the structural, qualitative changes resulting from our program. We used a purposeful stratified

sampling technique to select a representative sample from the population we serve. The number of program participants was 6738. Since elementary school aged children are, in most cases, not developmentally ready to reflect on their growth and development, we interviewed teachers. Of the 297 teachers whose classrooms we serve, our sample of 18 was drawn from the following strata of our population:

- All 2nd and 5th grade teachers at four schools chosen because they represented the diversity amongst Common Threads 21 partner schools: one school in a more affluent neighborhood, one high poverty rural school, one high poverty urban school and one school serving a more socioeconomically mixed student body.
- One teacher was disqualified because she was a long-term substitute who had only observed one of our lessons and did not feel like she knew Common Threads' programs well enough to be interviewed

Our interview team consisted of Rainey Aberle (AmeriCorps Food Educator), Sydney Latas (AmeriCorps Food Educator), Jessica Moerman (Operations Manager), and Laura Plaut (Executive Director). We conducted one-on-one interviews, each lasting around 30 minutes.

We analyzed the data inductively using a modified version of thematic analysis. Each interviewer implemented the first three phases of thematic analysis (becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, and identifying themes) for each interview. Together, we developed common themes from the entire data corpus identifying the overarching and inter-interview themes that emerged from the full scope of our data analysis to illuminate the collective insights and discoveries. We mapped these themes visually and examined the dynamics among the themes, causes and catalysts of the themes, new or surprising insights related to the themes, and relationships between the themes that were revealed in the data. We then determined the most significant and meaningful discoveries and brought them forward as findings to be described in the final phase of thematic analysis, this report.

Quantitative Data and Analysis

For the quantitative portion of the evaluation, we designed a questionnaire to collect data on our quantitative indicators of impact. We administered this instrument to 297 teachers and had a response of 97 teachers, a 32.7% response rate. The data were analyzed primarily using measures of central tendency. We identified key insights, patterns, and gaps within the data and incorporated these discoveries into the related findings. The most significant insights from the quantitative data are described in the following narrative.

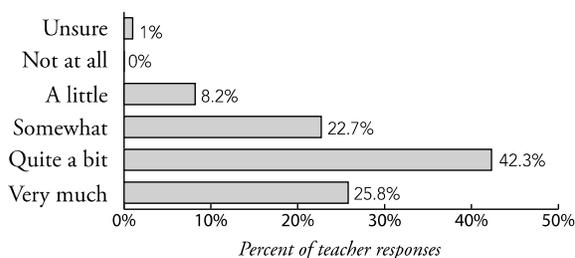
Findings

Finding 1: Adventure bites and cups of tea open doors to new foods

KEY INSIGHT: Kids are becoming more open to trying new and healthy foods.

Throughout our interviews, teachers revealed their belief that repeated exposure to Common Threads cooking programs has helped kids become more open-minded about trying new healthy foods—in particular, vegetables. The data revealed that taking an “adventure bite” – a taste of something new – has become part of school culture. One 2nd grade teacher from Lowell Elementary said, “I don’t have anybody completely refusing to put anything green in their mouth, but I did a few years ago, when those kids didn’t have that exposure. Now everyone tries... they’ll do the whole, ‘It’s not my cup of tea,’ but at least they’ll give it a go now which I think is a shift in attitude.”¹ 99% of the teachers responding to our online survey observed a significant increase in students’ sense of excitement or adventure when trying new foods or recipes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. My students have an increased sense of excitement or adventure when trying new foods or recipes. (n = 97)



Teachers perceive that kids are more willing to try new foods largely because they get to help grow and prepare them; because they taste new foods in an environment of positive peer pressure; and because Common Threads fosters a strong sense of choice and agency for kids.

Notably absent from our interviews were any criticisms of our recipes (which consistently and purposely include things like borscht and kale salad that don’t obviously fit the mainstream definition of “kid-friendly.”)

Our study suggests some potential differences in how kids approach cooking and gardening programs at higher poverty versus more affluent schools. Some teachers speculated that the “adventurousness” of kids who are living in poverty may be less about them not being picky, and more about them being hungry and therefore willing to eat any foods made available to them - healthy or not. This merits further inquiry, as our experience working with partners in the school food service program is full of examples of hungry kids rejecting healthy food - and suggests the possibility that the positive food experiences provided by Common Threads serve as a critical “tipping point” in students’ willingness to try new foods, regardless of underlying hunger or food insecurity issues.

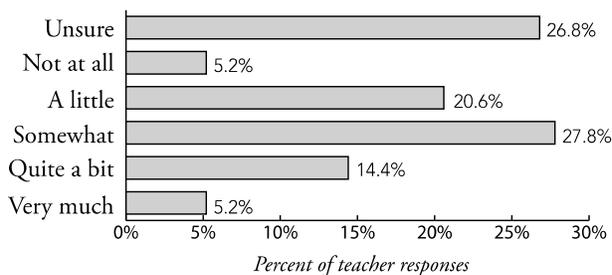
Our findings are limited to what kids eat in school settings in view of their teachers. Many teachers expressed that they were limited in their capacity to assess kids’ willingness to try new foods. As one teacher said, “I see their lunch boxes, but I don’t see their lunches” Although some teachers referenced

¹ Common Threads teaches kids the phrase “It’s not my cup of tea” as a respectful way to say they don’t like something after they’ve tried it. We consistently heard from teachers that kids also use this phrase outside of gardening or cooking time as a polite way of expressing preference.

conversations they had with parents about kids becoming more adventurous at home, they were also quick to note that their personal observations were from the school setting only.

68% of the teachers responding to our survey perceived that their students had increased their consumption of fruits and vegetables at school, but 27% said they were “unsure” - a datapoint consistent with our interview findings that teachers are not necessarily well positioned to observe students’ eating behaviors (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. My students have increased their consumption of whole foods, particularly fruits and vegetables, at school. (n=97)



SIGNIFICANCE

Our data reveal that adults are often surprised and delighted by how willing kids are to try new foods when those foods are presented in an engaging peer-based classroom setting. Common Threads programs contribute to a positive shift in kids’ attitudes towards trying more vegetables and also challenge adult perceptions that kids are naturally picky eaters. As Bellingham Public Schools, our main school district partner, moves toward a scratch cooking kitchen, Common Threads can play a strategic role in increasing kids’ enthusiasm for healthy food so that the healthy foods served to them in the cafeteria are more likely to be eaten rather than rejected. Building kids’ willingness to try healthy foods when they’re young also increases the likelihood that they will choose healthy foods as they age.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

- Include more agency and food choice for students into our lessons
- Share examples of the enthusiasm and adventurousness that students show in our classes to families through social media and video projects.
- Make sure to keep socioeconomics and culture in mind when discussing food preferences.

Finding 2: Because “it’s fun” is reason enough

KEY INSIGHT: Our data affirmed that both kids and teachers find in-school cooking and gardening lessons to be joyful learning experiences. Many teachers cited *joy* as reason enough to spend class time cooking and gardening.

Not only are kids trying new vegetables as a result of our gardening and cooking programs, but they are having fun while doing it. Nearly every teacher interviewed mentioned the word “love” or “joy” in describing gardening and cooking experiences. Teachers cited kids’ pride in cooking, stating that kids were respectful about learning cooking techniques—including safe knife usage—and were excited about tasting the end product whether they ended up liking it or not. Teachers also mentioned kids’ delight in trying garden edibles and noted that they experienced peace during garden classes. One teacher said, “Sometimes if they’re writing in their garden journal, sitting still in the garden, [kids are] feeling a kind of peace or a calm.”

Interviews affirmed that kids and teachers alike look forward to spending time outside of their regular classroom. One teacher said, “If gardening or cooking is up on the schedule, people definitely are excited.”

We had expected to hear more from teachers about how Common Threads programs are building on and supporting in-class curricular goals. While we did hear some of this, most teachers were more excited to tell us about how gardening and cooking experiences have provided students with a much-needed opportunity to achieve socioemotional learning goals and to develop as humans. One teacher said, “You might expect me to say, ‘I wish this matched my curriculum better’ - but honestly, I just want them to get outside. I want them to try something new and feel brave about that. It doesn’t have to match my curriculum at all... depth of instruction isn’t so much my worry - I just want them to get their toes wet and have fun doing it with someone who really cares.”

SIGNIFICANCE

The Common Threads team has worked hard over the years to ensure that cooking and gardening curriculum are aligned with academic standards. It was illuminating to hear how many teachers are satisfied or even prefer that the focus be on fostering a simple sense of joy, teamwork, and camaraderie. We view this finding with a bit of caution as long-term staff have watched the pendulum swing both ways on this topic. Particularly when teachers are presented with new curricula or standards, the pendulum has swung more towards teachers feeling a need to justify gardening and cooking time as supporting those standards. Our conclusion is that we are currently doing a generally good job of finding the “sweet spot” of balancing fun and exploration with rigor and clear learning objectives, and that Common Threads’ programs are making a difference in kids’ lives by giving them valuable opportunities to feel brave, capable, and engaged at school.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

- Clearly claim and advertise joy and fun as legitimate program goals. For instance, create an infographic for teachers that highlights program goals and motivations, including joy and fun.

- Collaborate with Bellingham School District partners to connect successes that kids are experiencing through gardening and cooking programs with socioemotional learning goals.
- Continue to incorporate games, songs, books, and videos into our curriculum.

Finding 3: A space for kids to blossom

KEY INSIGHT: Some students who struggle in more traditional classroom environments “show up” in new and positive ways during Common Threads cooking and gardening classes.

Many of the teachers we interviewed see Common Threads’ cooking and gardening time as an opportunity for kids to shine and feel successful. This is particularly true for kids who struggle in other parts of their school day.

Teachers reported that some students claim cooking or gardening as their “thing,” or their time to act as leaders. One teacher said, “It’s a fun thing, something they can succeed at. Many students have struggled academically and [in the garden] they may not.” Another teacher said, “I notice more bravery out in the garden and more bravery with cooking. It gives them a chance to shine - when a kid is given something to chop, they can say, ‘Oh! I’ve done this before!’ and it gives them more elevated status - or when we’re out in the garden and someone isn’t scared of holding the earthworms or the spiders... they can feel excited and powerful in a new realm.” Yet another teacher appreciated that cooking and gardening is a time with “all of the expectations but none of the pressure” of traditional classroom time.

Teachers notice and value the opportunity for kids who struggle in traditional academic settings to shine. Throughout our teacher interviews, teachers became most animated when telling us stories about this aspect of gardening and cooking programs. Common Threads programs help teachers see a different side of some of their most challenging students. For instance, one teacher excitedly pulled out her phone during the interview to show some pictures of kids learning in the garden. Pointing to a young boy with a clipboard and pen in his hand, sketching a plant, she said “he’s a real low achiever - this is the first time I saw him imagine himself as a scientist.”

One teacher said, “I have one student specifically who, he knew a lot of trauma. Cooking was the first time I’d seen him engage or connect to kids at all. And then I was able to share that with his mom and he and his mom made cookies together and that was a powerful thing.” Our interview findings were supported by responses to our quantitative survey in which 97% of teachers responded affirmatively that students who are typically less successful or engaged could shine when they are cooking or gardening with Common Threads.

The data also show that Common Threads recipes affirm students’ home cultures. A teacher at Alderwood Elementary noted, “My Russian students love seeing things they eat all the time,” and, “My Indian students say it’s just like what they eat at home. The cultural connections evoke a sense of pride... it’s neat to see them connecting that way.”

Multiple teachers noted that for students who already garden or cook at home, Common Threads programs affirm and reinforce skills learned at home. One teacher shared that “one little girl would

always bring her little garden gloves because she was so excited about weeding and didn't want to get her hands dirty. Some kids help garden at home and quite a few raise chickens, so they'll talk about composting and feeding the chickens."

In contrast, other teachers commented that for students who lacked previous exposure to gardening or cooking, Common Threads programs were providing exposure to new skills and "planting a seed" of enthusiasm and excitement for these subjects.

It's worth noting that not all teachers agreed that there was better behavior in gardening or cooking. Some teachers expressed concern about students who struggle without the predictable routine of the classroom environment. One teacher said, "the students who struggle during my lessons are the same ones I see struggling during the cooking lessons."

SIGNIFICANCE

Our interviews revealed that the positive impact on students' capacity for improved teamwork and heightened sense of self are among the aspects of our programming that teachers value most highly. We advertise ourselves as a program that helps kids fall in love with healthy food, but our interviews and surveys reveal that we are actually a program that helps kids fall in *love*, not just with food, but also with themselves, their peers, life, school, etc. We invite kids to "show up" as their best selves at school.

Gardening and cooking classes offer the opportunity for teachers to "hit the reset button" on challenging dynamics between themselves and struggling students. Gardening and cooking classes are times when teachers may feel more compassion for and more pride in some of their students who struggle in a more traditional classroom environment and remember that it's possible to see these kids as smart, capable and interested.

From the student perspective, gardening and cooking are times when struggling students can feel smart, hear themselves praised, and experience a sense of belonging. Particularly as schools more explicitly embrace socioemotional learning and "education of the whole child" as part of their mandate, the evidence gleaned during this study confirms Common Threads' belief in the role our programs play in meeting these goals.

Concerns expressed by some teachers that some kids who are struggling at school struggle even more in a gardening and cooking environment warrants continued attention. The last thing we want is to be one more place where kids fail to meet expectations.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

- Look for opportunities for Food Educators to plug into existing school programs that highlight student success in gardening and cooking lessons (for example, "catching kids doing something good").
- Share a "Chef of the month" or "Garden Blossom" to recognize when kids demonstrate exemplary leadership.
- More explicitly celebrate student leadership development as a key program outcome.

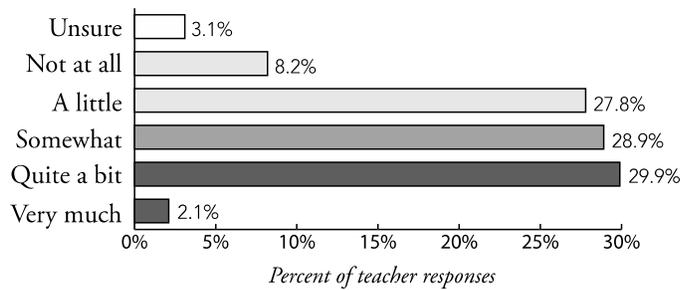
- Continue exploring how to train Food Educators to support students who struggle with gardening and cooking classes.

Finding 4: How many kids does it take to grow a garden or cook a stew? (Answer: All of them!)

KEY INSIGHT: Kids practice and develop valuable cooperation and teamwork skills during both cooking and gardening lessons.

The teachers we interviewed consistently cited teamwork and cooperation as among the most important skills developed through Common Threads cooking and gardening programs. Our quantitative data was consistent with this finding: 88.7% of teachers responding believed that students’ ability to work in a group improved (see Figure 3). When cooking with up to 30 peers, students are - out of necessity - learning to share tools, take turns, and divide up cooking jobs. One teacher said, “That social negotiation that they usually have to do about divvying up the jobs, I think it’s good for [the kids] to practice!” One teacher shared a photograph of three kids working together in the garden, saying, “These three really struggle with each other in class, but not here.”

Figure 3. My students’ ability to work well in a group has improved. (n=97)



Alongside the previous findings about the value of fun and joy, as well as the value of kids getting the opportunity to shine, here again, teachers helped us to recognize teamwork as something they valued as a key outcome of our programming. Teachers yearn for authentic group work experiences with a tangible outcome and they appreciate Common Threads’ capacity to facilitate these kinds of experiential team-building experiences.

While teamwork came up in conversations about both cooking and gardening, it was a more significant theme in response to cooking programs. Teachers noted that the immediate gratification of cooking was more of a catalyst for teamwork than was the longer-term patience required to tend a garden.

Interestingly, although teamwork consistently emerged as a very strong positive impact of Common Threads’ programs during teacher interviews, responses to our online teacher survey were, though positive, more evenly spread across “a little”, “somewhat” and “quite a bit.” [See Chart above]. While

most teachers seem to feel this is a positive aspect of Common Threads programming, we are curious why this emerged as so much of a stronger positive during our in-person conversations than it did in our survey.

SIGNIFICANCE

The ability to work as a team and take turns are critical, transferable life skills. It matters that students learn to work with others - even with those with whom they may have conflict. During gardening and cooking, kids are able to reap the benefits of working together to create a vibrant garden or a delicious dish. These learning contexts offer kids both the opportunity and the motivation to build their teamwork muscles.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

- More proudly identify team-building as a key program outcome with stakeholders.
- Look for ways to more explicitly incorporate teamwork and cooperation into gardening components of our programs.
- Incorporate more dialogue with teachers regarding group work in our classes. For example, is it helpful for educators to change groups each class or maintain teams through cooking and gardening classes?

Finding 5: Real skills for real life

KEY INSIGHT: Students learn valuable, concrete life skills - particularly in the cooking portion of our programming.

In addition to some of the “soft skills” that kids are learning in Common Threads lessons (teamwork, patience, respect for critters and plants in the garden), the data revealed that students are also learning “hard” skills through their cooking and gardening classes, such as knife techniques, food safety, and hygiene. One teacher shared, “Students now take care to wash their hands and use tongs to pass out their morning snack after practicing this in their winter cooking lessons.”

We heard in interviews that not all students have the opportunity to use tools at home. One teacher said, “I always thought you have wonderful lessons and you let them do the work, because I don’t know how many of them help cook at home.”

Teachers responding to our survey also noted that learning how to use knives and other cooking tools safely, as well as developing good hygiene habits while cooking, were among the most important skills learned in Common Threads classes. 97% of the teachers responding to our survey indicated that Common Threads’ programs had increased their students’ understanding of how to cook safely (see Figure 4). 99% indicated that Common Threads’ programs had increased students’ understanding of how to care for a garden (see Figure 5).

Figure 4. My students have a better understanding of how to cook safely. (n=97)

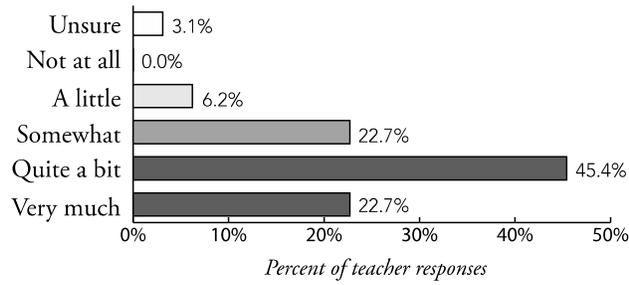
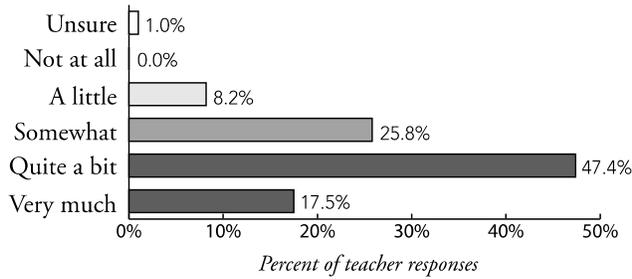
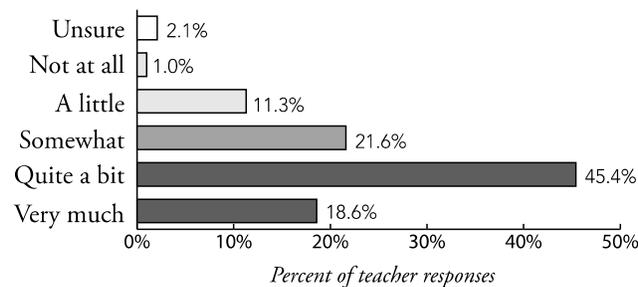


Figure 5. My students have a better understanding of how to care for a garden. (n=97)



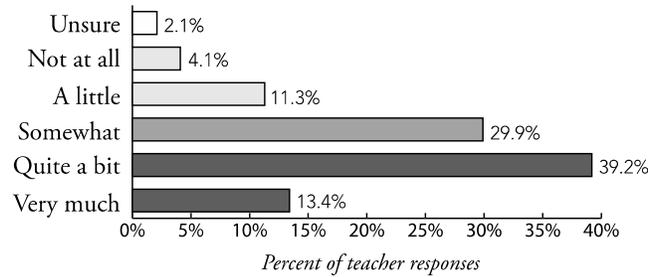
Although appreciation of the garden ecosystem came up less frequently or forcefully in our interviews, it's notable that 97% of the teachers responding to our survey credited Common Threads with increasing students' appreciation for the garden ecosystem (see Figure 6). We speculate that the relative absence of conversation on this topic during our interviews may have had to do with the fact that we conducted our interviews during the winter when gardening was less front-of-mind for many of our interviewees.

Figure 6. My students have an increased appreciation for the garden ecosystem. (n=97)



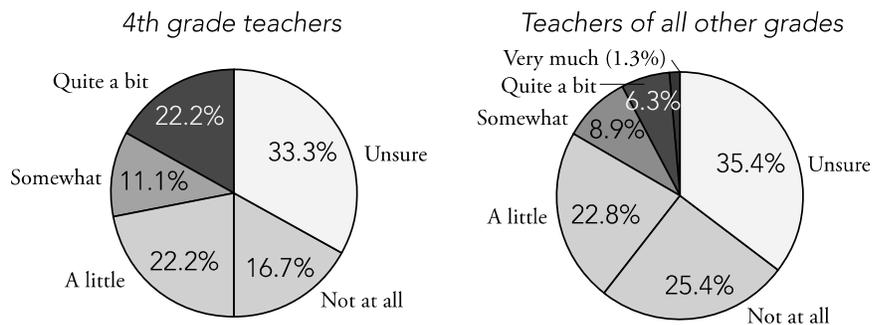
The important real-life skills of making healthy food choices and developing an awareness of how food choices affect an individual’s health did not clearly emerge in our teacher interviews. Yet, 94% of the teachers responding to our online survey expressed that Common Threads programs did impact students’ awareness of how their food choices affect personal health at least a little bit. An additional 53% credited Common Threads’ programs with increasing student awareness of how their food choices affect personal health “quite a bit” or “a lot” (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. My students have an increased awareness of how their food choices affect personal health. (n=97)



Our online survey revealed that only 41% of teachers responding felt that students’ skills in reading labels to make good food choices had increased because of Common Threads programming. This stands out as an area for improvement. We partner with an organization called Pure Food Kids to facilitate a cooking lesson for 4th graders with a specific focus on reading labels. We became curious to see if 4th grade teachers responded any differently. We found that 17% of 4th grade teachers felt “quite a bit” or more that students’ skills in label reading to make good food choices had improved, compared to only 8% of teachers of all other grades (see Figure 8). This specific lesson likely had some impact on the way teachers responded.

Figure 8. My students’ skills in reading labels to make good food choices have increased. (n=97)



While teachers often commented on how much they appreciated kids learning to appropriately use kitchen tools (knives in particular), our program was not perceived as particularly effective in helping kids learn how to better use garden tools, even though several teachers specifically mentioned other

organizations or experiences that had helped students learn to safely and appropriately use tools like shovels and loppers.

SIGNIFICANCE

Too often, young people lack opportunities to develop and demonstrate real-world competence. Knowing how to grow a garden or prepare a meal is not only a practical skill, but also a tremendous source of pride for young people yearning to demonstrate their ability to contribute to the world in meaningful ways. Common Threads' choice to trust kids to use real tools, and also give them the clear instructions that set them up for success creates an important opportunity for kids to develop and demonstrate competence.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

- Increase proper tool use and tool care lessons into cooking and gardening classes.
- More explicitly incorporate practical skills learning objectives into lesson plans, such as knife skills, hygiene, and ingredient measurement.
- Communicate with families what skills their students are learning and possibly incorporate these skills into our take-home recipes.
- Sell knife kits or basic kitchen kits with instructions for proper use.

Finding 6: AmeriCorps Food Educators Are the “Special Sauce”

KEY INSIGHT: The success of our program depends heavily on AmeriCorps Food Educators, who bring our mission to life with their passion, enthusiasm, and dedication.

We heard in multiple interviews that the AmeriCorps Food Educator plays a key role in the success of our program delivery. Teachers appreciate that our Food Educators are “cool” young adults that their students can look up to. While each Food Educator has their own strengths and weaknesses, one teacher stated, “I just appreciate having AmeriCorps members. It’s so good for the kids. They’re cool. That’s just the human element that helps them grow. [The AmeriCorps members] all want to be there, they’ve all demonstrated a passion.”

When Food Educators cultivate strong relationships with students and staff, students are more prone to engage and be excited about cooking and gardening classes. One 2nd grade teacher at Alderwood Elementary said, “You could give these kids the greatest lesson in the world, and they would not engage in it if they didn’t have a connection to their Food Educator first. That has made all the difference.”

The flip side to the youthful passion of our AmeriCorps Food Educators is a relatively low level of experience with classroom management. Despite classroom management trainings offered by Common Threads, management skills vary greatly from educator to educator. In contrasting her experience with different educators, one teacher said, “I think in years past it (gardening and cooking) has been a stressful time for me, because I’ve felt like the cop, and I’m spending 45 minutes just telling kids to stop

doing this. I'm enjoying things a lot more now that I'm able to really engage in a different way, so that's been really nice."

SIGNIFICANCE

Our program model of using AmeriCorps service members as Food Educators is a double-edged sword. Service members hold high value because they are passionate, "cool" young people who connect well with kids. Kids' relationships with these young adults are different from and complementary to other relationships they have with adults like teachers and caregivers. The AmeriCorps members, generally in their 20s, are seen as role models. Kids are willing to take risks and try new things simply because they're eager to build relationships with a young adult. Particularly for kids without a lot of positive relationships in their lives, the addition of an additional caring young adult at school can make a positive difference in their school experience.

Because AmeriCorps members are relatively inexperienced teachers, with limited classroom management skills, who stay for just one year, we rely on clear, consistent, timely, direct feedback from seasoned teachers to accelerate their learning curve as educators.

It's concerning that even after so many years of partnership with schools, some teachers still seem to be confused about how best to navigate the relationship with each new Food Educator. Our hope has been that teachers would see themselves as mentors to the Food Educators and would feel free to offer Food Educators direct and immediate feedback - particularly on classroom management skills. We heard a reluctance from some teachers who worried about "stepping on the educator's toes" as well as a lack of clarity on their role more generally in the partnership.

Although teachers did not say this outright, we perceived in our interviews that they didn't always feel a sense of agency or motivation to build a true partnership with Food Educators - either because they didn't see this as an appropriate role for them to take on, or because it felt like too much work to invest in a mentoring relationship. It was also interesting (but not necessarily surprising) for us to notice how vastly different the Food Educator's relationship can be from one teacher to another, even within the same building.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

- Endeavor to select members with stronger teaching background, offer more training opportunities, encourage members to observe master teachers frequently, and continuing to offer co-teaching opportunities, particularly in classes with challenging behavior.
- Prioritize making time for Food Educators to interact with teachers through staff meetings and other face-to-face events to explicitly define the role of the educator and our expectations of teachers and the school (for instance, including Americorps member in staff meetings, including food educator photos on staff boards.)
- Continue to invest in relationships at the administrative level (between Common Threads' Executive Director and core staff and school principals.)

Finding 7: Trojan horses for social change

KEY INSIGHT: Students often bring their new-found knowledge and enthusiasm for healthy food home and inspire their families to have more conversations about healthy food and make healthier food choices at home.

Kids' enthusiasm for healthy food is contagious. Teachers offered an interesting range of experiences related to whether and how information about healthy eating was making it home to families. One teacher reported that gardening and cooking came up as a positive in parent/teacher conferences. Multiple teachers told stories of families happily tending the school garden over the summer, and of the school garden becoming a place of warm welcome within the school community. Others pointed to the number of times that kids (and parents) request recipes to take home and share their experiences of preparing the recipes at home. One teacher explained how a parent who had not typically engaged in her student's school experience got more invested because of the garden, stating, "I have a student who has huge issues. I think they're homeless, and the mom is really hard to engage with. But the big thing she wanted to talk about during conferences was, her daughter wants to write a letter to be sure the garden is saved when the new school is built. Her daughter loves the garden so much. And I also know from SeeSaw (a parent communication tool used by many of our partner teachers) the parents really respond when I send pictures of them cooking and in the garden so I get a lot of positive feedback from the families about the time in the garden."

In contrast, other teachers reported very little information flow or family engagement related to food education programs. One teacher mused, "Maybe I'm not doing enough to share with families. It's the same people who take care of the garden every summer." Another teacher attributed the lack of home/school connection to the demographics of her student population, saying, "School feels very separate from home."

SIGNIFICANCE

Common Threads has an opportunity to tease out "best practices" for engaging families across different school demographics and for dealing with teachers' differing levels of engagement with and support of our programs, and then to amplify those best practices across our partner schools. While it is affirming to hear stories of families engaging in gardening or cooking, the wide range of reported family engagement serves as a good reminder of how uneven and inequitable families' experiences of school programs can be. Some families have the luxury of engaging deeply in various aspects of their children's school experiences (cooking and gardening being just one example), while others may not have the time or capacity due to their life circumstances. Some parents know and love Common Threads programs. Others may be largely unaware of their children's experiences cooking and gardening at school. In our school-based programs, the opportunities to engage with and communicate with families can vary greatly depending on the culture of the school, and even classroom by classroom. Particularly given that kids often have limited agency in what foods are served at home, the more we are successful in reaching out to families, the more likely we are to support systemic changes in the foods that are available to kids at home as well as at school.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

- Encourage teachers to share cooking and gardening news with families and highlight teachers who we know already do this well.
- Continue to look for ways to invite families to engage directly with Common Threads via social media and face-to-face interactions that might include a Parents Night Out series or family cooking and eating events.
- Expand food education programs to better meet the needs of parents, particularly in high poverty communities. For instance, provide more information about container gardening for apartment living and send students home with very basic cooking tools.

Finding 8: We can prime the pump, but we can't provide the water

KEY INSIGHT: “Access” to healthy food is financial, geographic, and experiential. The data confirmed our belief that while Common Threads programs can play a significant role in helping open kids’ hearts and minds to healthy food, we will always depend on families and partners to complete the access puzzle.

As discussed in our other findings above, the data indicate that Common Threads’ programs have a significant, consistent, positive impact on kids’ willingness to try new foods and also on their happiness and engagement at school. The data were less clear, however, on whether Common Threads’ programs are meaningfully changing how and what kids eat. This could be because our interviewees (teachers) are not well positioned to speak to kids’ eating habits. As one teacher pointed out, “I see their lunch boxes, but not their lunches. We do have breakfast in the classroom, but they don’t really have much choice there.” Another explanation could be that the healthy food values that are taught and modeled in Common Threads’ cooking and gardening classes are not well matched by the foods that are available to kids at home or in the school cafeteria. As one 5th grade teacher from Alderwood explained, “There are many barriers... getting food from food banks, a lot of junk food available, or EBT families... For them, it’s not ‘I eat what I want,’ it’s ‘I eat what I have.’”

SIGNIFICANCE

Common Threads excels at getting kids excited about eating healthy food. This is our particular niche in the food access puzzle. However, in order to have the greatest possible positive impact on kids’ attitudes and behaviors regarding food, we need to invest significant time and effort in teaming with other organizations (and with families) to shift the dial towards a reality in which the healthy choice is also the easy, affordable, and accessible choice for all kids. If we can support systems in which healthy eating becomes the norm for students of all backgrounds, we can help decrease food related challenges ranging from obesity and diabetes to poor behavior at school.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

- Invest more time organizationally in supporting the school food service program and families: create a “healthy food systems” position that supports school food service initiatives and healthy eating.
- Explore options for increasing accessibility to families by sending resources home, such as a “20 Buck Box” and information for being resourceful in the kitchen at home.
- More explicitly position ourselves organizationally as the “experience experts.”

Finding 9: Sprinkle liberally with clear roles, goals, and expectations

KEY INSIGHT: Our interviews highlighted that when roles, goals and expectations between Common Threads and partner school staff are clearly defined, relationships are smoother and more successful.

A previous finding focused specifically on the relationship between teachers and Food Educators, and this finding explores further the relationship and connections between Common Threads as an organization and school communities more holistically. Some teachers expressed a clear sense of linkages between Common Threads programs and other classroom goals and activities. As one teacher said, “It’s helping me look for connections and make it seem like garden is not such an isolated thing. And we can kind of incorporate it into what we do every day. Like our number corner this month is all these garden beds, and it’s been really nice to just talk about our school garden and just kind of have a

A number of teachers expressed a wish for greater clarity around Common Threads’ program objectives as well as a general interest in finding ways to more effectively link garden and cooking lessons with their classroom curriculum. One teacher said, “I’m not sure if my class is allowed to use the garden on non-gardening days.” Another asked, “How can I extend the lessons we’re doing in the garden into the classroom?” Yet another observed, “I like the content you’re teaching during cooking/gardening, but it’s showing up too early/too late to introduce/reinforce [xyz] lesson.”

SIGNIFICANCE

We were encouraged by teachers’ curiosity about the logistics of garden use and how they could more effectively leverage the garden as a curricular tool. Some of the comments, however, highlight the gap between what we believe we’ve communicated and what teachers have heard. It seems possible that teachers’ perceptions of Common Threads as a resource may be outdated and point toward the importance of iterative communication about Common Threads’ programs. As an organization, we have worked hard to stay succinct and unobtrusive in our communications, recognizing that messages from Common Threads can be just one more source of overwhelm in teachers’ already over-full inboxes. Yet interview comments reveal that teachers either feel they haven’t received enough information about Common Threads’ curricular scope and sequence, or that the information that they have received has not been readily digestible.

Clear relationships between teachers and AmeriCorps members will yield the most meaningful learning experiences for kids. When teachers are clear about their role in behavior management, Food Educators

can devote more of their energy to teaching content. When teachers understand the scope and sequence of lessons, they are better able to connect it with their classroom curriculum.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

- Strengthen our training for AmeriCorps members in community organizing and relationship building with stakeholder groups, including principals, parents, students, custodians, and food service staff.
- Continue thinking about how to best provide AmeriCorps members with tools, resources, and training needed to effectively articulate their role as educators as well as Common Threads' role as a community partner.
- Increase involvement in PTA and teacher staff meetings to strengthen relationships, improve transparency on Food Educator roles, and highlight transitions throughout the year from gardening to cooking in the winter, and then back to gardening in the spring.
- Make more lesson extensions and resources available to teachers.
- Offer more training and resources for teachers to use the garden as an extension of their classroom.
- Experiment: host a series of focused conversations with teachers to explore the potential of Common Threads' support specifically in the areas of curriculum alignment, socioemotional learning, nutrition education, and family engagement, potentially incentivized with snacks and a stipend for attendance.
- Experiment: offer a stipend to teachers who agree to serve as a school garden liaison or serve on the school garden committee (but first consider the potential pitfalls and benefits of financial incentives to involvement with Common Threads and school gardens.)

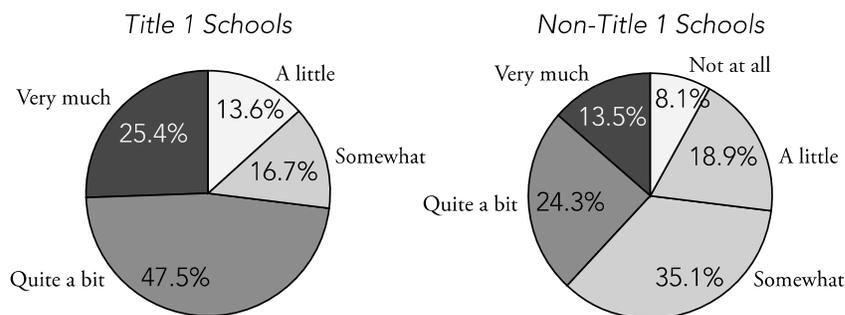
Finding 10: A “want” for some, a “need” for others

KEY INSIGHT: The value that teachers place on Common Threads programs is greater at schools serving a higher poverty student population than at schools that serve a more affluent student population.

One teacher, in reflecting on her experiences at two schools with very different student demographics said, “At this school, my kids *need* this program. It would be *devastating* to lose it. At the other school, it would be a shame to lose it, but parents would find a way to fill in.” Teachers consistently spoke to the value they placed on “planting the seed” and “exposure” for their kids whose life experiences - both in school and out - involve a lot of struggle and strife. They spoke to how important it is for kids to have a place to shine and also to how kids at higher poverty schools “gobble up” the healthy snacks that are made available to them.

The results to our survey reflected that 72.9% of teachers at Title 1 schools reported that they saw students who struggle academically shine in the garden “quite a bit” or “very much” compared with only 37.8% at more affluent schools (see Figure 9).

Figure 9. My students who are typically less successful or engaged can shine when they are gardening or cooking. (n=97)



A teacher from one rural, high poverty school said, “I’ve loved that this introduces them to a wide variety of foods that the majority of them aren’t exposed to at home. Spinach, kale, spices, even curry...The majority of them don’t have exposure to healthy foods at home, so any exposure to that is great.”

SIGNIFICANCE

This finding affirms our belief in the importance of filtering organizational decisions around where and how we direct organizational resources through the lens of equity and inclusion. Teachers place high value on Common Threads cooking and gardening programs regardless of the demographics of their student population, yet it was sobering to hear how emphatic teachers were about the importance of Common Threads programming in higher poverty communities. The question, “If Common Threads programs disappeared tomorrow, what difference would that make?” elicited the most emotional responses from teachers at high poverty schools.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

- Continue to work toward a transparent, sustainable and equitable program fee scale to reduce barriers to participation for high-poverty schools.
- Identify sustainable funding sources to cover program costs for high-poverty schools.
- Provide free, supplemental programs and services at high-poverty schools.
- Charge low-poverty schools for supplemental programs and services.
- Assign a full-time food educator to high poverty schools, so that the educator can more fully invest in that school’s students and community.
- Continue to train Food Educators in best practices for working with kids living in high risk environments.

Conclusion

Insights Into Impact

Whereas the story we've been telling ourselves is that Common Threads "grows good eaters", the most significant learning that came from this study is that our stakeholders believe that we "grow good humans."

While it's true that we are helping kids fall in love with healthy food and that kids are becoming more adventurous, healthy and open-minded eaters because of Common Threads' cooking and gardening programs, it's also true that our programs positively impact kids' feelings about themselves as learners and their abilities to work well as a team. We're not just a "food education" program but also a program that fosters curiosity and joy that extend far beyond kids' relationships with food, and we have an opportunity to tell the story of our impact more holistically.

Another key insight is that our relationships with people and entities outside of Common Threads (teachers, families, food service staff) are key to maximizing our positive impact. For instance, while it's our role to get kids more excited and willing to try new foods, ultimately, it's the responsibility of caregivers and food service staff to make sure that healthy foods are available to kids. Similarly, while our responsibility is to bring clear and compelling gardening and cooking lessons to teachers and their students, we necessarily count on teachers to help make connections to the curriculum, to give our educators clear and timely feedback, and to support behavior management during gardening and cooking lessons.

Steps Forward

More proudly, explicitly, and holistically claim and proclaim the benefits of Common Threads programming. Recognizing that the impacts we are having in improving student self-concept, happiness at school, and ability to work collaboratively with their classmates are as significant as our ability to get kids excited about eating healthier food.

1. **Continue to focus on training for food educators and volunteers.** Recognizing that the more training they receive, the more likely they are to facilitate positive growth experiences for kids in our community.
1. **Continue to seek opportunities to improve communications with school staff and families.** This will include putting out a call for a school or schools that would like to work with us toward building a "gold standard of food education." This might include things like more explicit opportunities for family education, a more comprehensive "garden to cafeteria to garden" program that looks not only at how to get more school garden grown food into the cafeteria but also at how to get more cafeteria "waste" back into the garden as compost.
2. **Continue to analyze our services and fee structures through the lens of equity.** Looking particularly at opportunities to offer more services to high poverty schools where we notice our services are most highly valued.

Opportunities for Future Evaluation

We are excited to apply the methodologies learned through Project Impact to a variety of aspects of our programming and particularly love the idea of scheduling "deep-dive sessions" throughout the year,

during which we will commit to prioritizing time for program evaluation. Most immediately, we are excited to evaluate our Kids Cook Lunch summer meal program, which we are just preparing to launch. Future opportunities for evaluation also include looking at the role a year of service plays in the lives of our AmeriCorps members; looking to understand the impact Common Threads' programs have on the lives of our donors; and looking to more deeply understand the impact Common Threads' programs have on students attending high-poverty, Title I schools.

Appendices

Appendix A: Indicators of impact

Impact #1: (SKILLS) Kids can grow and prepare healthy food.

What we mean: Kids know how to plant and tend to vegetables, use common kitchen tools, and follow simple recipes.

<p>Know</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Know how to plant and tend seeds, understand what plants need to grow ● Understand safety in the kitchen 	<p>Believe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Believe in their capability to grow and prepare food
<p>Do Ability to...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Plant and tend food gardens ● Use common kitchen tools ● Prepare a simple, healthy dish at school and at home ● Follow a recipe 	<p>Become Act as...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A garden steward at their school ● A model and advocate for healthy eating at home
<p>Feel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase appreciation for the garden ecosystem ● Increase confidence in growing and preparing food 	<p>Love</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop a love for and curiosity about the natural world ● Develop passion for growing and preparing healthy foods

Impact #2: (MINDSET) Kids develop a joyful, positive and nourishing relationship with food.

What we mean: Kids have positive exposure to food and consider components of health when making food choices.

<p>Know</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase self awareness of how different foods make them feel ● Understand that taste is personal, 	<p>Believe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Believe in personal power to make food choices that make them feel healthy and strong
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<p>familial, and cultural</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Believe that food is a part of personal, familial, and cultural identity ● Demonstrate a consistent stance of open-mindedness toward unfamiliar foods
<p>Do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create a fun experience for themselves with food at home ● Demonstrate a willingness to try new or unfamiliar foods 	<p>Become</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop a habit of making healthy food choices (not because they “should” but because it “feels good” and “is fun.”)
<p>Feel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase of joy, wonder, pride, and curiosity in growing and eating new (healthy?) foods ● Have excitement about trying new foods 	<p>Love</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Embrace eating as a social experience ● Kids know and love the difference between how their bodies feel when they eat healthy vs. less healthy food. They love what it feels like to feel good.

Impact #3: Kids develop nutritional literacy

What we mean: Kids will be able to recognize what is healthy vs not healthy, with a strong focus on the benefits of eating more vegetables

<p>Know</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have tools to decide whether a food is “healthy” (whole vs. processed, # ingredients, amount of sugar, colors of the rainbow...) ● Understand how food choices impact personal health ● Recognize healthy foods 	<p>Believe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Believe in the importance of healthy food choices
<p>Do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase consumption of whole foods (particularly vegetables and fruits) ● Decrease consumption of processed foods ● Read nutrition labels and use them to make food choices 	<p>Become</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Become more mindful in choosing foods that will nourish their bodies

<p>Feel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase confidence in the principles of healthy eating ● Decrease in anxiety/shame/fear around food choices 	<p>Love</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Have a commitment to eating healthy food
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Impact #4: Kids feel capable and empowered to make healthy choices for their bodies.

What we mean: Kids perceive themselves as having agency both in how they treat their bodies and also in how hands-on food education grounds them as learners.

<p>Know</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Kids know how their food choices affect their bodies. 	<p>Believe</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Kids believe in their capability to make healthy choices, or learn from their own choices ● Positive outlook on their future food choices ● Believe they are capable in all areas of their life
<p>Do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Choose foods with their own body health in mind 	<p>Become</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Habitually choose foods with a healthy mind, body, and spirit in mind (longer-term thinking) ● Develop self-efficacy
<p>Feel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Excited, joyful and engaged ● Increased confidence in nourishing themselves ● Increased confidence in overcoming barriers to healthy eating 	<p>Love</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Kids feel pride in their lifestyle, including food choices

Appendix B: Principles of change

Why do we do what we do in the way that we do it?

FEATURE: School-based

- Power of positive peer pressure (kids will engage in food behaviors with their peers differently than they will with their families)
- We go to where all kids can access food education programs (e.g. schools)

FEATURE: Real Tools, Real Recipes

- Kids are more capable than adults give them credit for (capable of enjoying sophisticated flavors, using “adult” tools)
- Kids are like Trojan Horses - if we use them well we can get healthy food messages into their homes (for instance, sending easy, affordable recipes home)

FEATURE: Simple recipes featuring locally available produce, in season

- Healthy delicious food does not have to be complicated or expensive

FEATURE: AmeriCorps service member model

- Through our partnership with AmeriCorps, we are able to expose *a lot* of kids to positive gardening, cooking, and eating experiences.
- We are also able to support emerging young professionals in developing skills, considering career paths in education, agriculture, and nutrition.

Appendix C: Qualitative Interview Protocol

Protocol Questions

1. What have your students learned through their experience with Common Threads' gardening and cooking lessons? How have Common Threads' programs changed conversations in your classroom (about food or anything else)? → How have you noticed this changing what kids believe about their abilities? (know-believe)
2. We're really interested in understanding how Common Threads gardening and cooking programs are impacting kids' socioemotional and academic learning experiences – can you talk to us a little about anything you're noticing? What connections do you see students making that they might not have made before cooking and gardening with Common Threads? → How do you see your students' attitudes about health and/or learning shifting as a result? How are yours shifting? (know-believe)
3. What changes in food choices are you observing because of your students' experience with Common Threads? What are the barriers that are keeping your students from making healthy food choices? → How have you seen your students approaching food/food choices differently? What evidence do you see that your students are loving healthy food? How is this affecting your food choices? (do-become)
4. What new skills have your students been practicing or using as a result of their classes with Common Threads? → How are you seeing their habits (as eaters or as learners) changing? (do-become)
5. What are you noticing about how Common Threads programs are affecting the way students are feeling about learning? (Joyfulness, cooperation, fun, enthusiasm for learning, etc.) → How is this affecting the way you're feeling about teaching and learning? How is this impacting the culture of your classroom? (know-believe)
6. Are you hearing or observing anything about how gardening and cooking are having an impact on families and within the greater school community? → How has this affected the way families are involved in your classroom? (do-become)
7. Have you seen kids showing up/sharing themselves differently during cooking/gardening? → How have you seen your students' sense of agency and self-efficacy change as a result of Common Threads classes? In what other ways have you seen them growing as a result of their experience with Common Threads? How is that affecting your teaching practice (or you, as a teacher)? (do-become)
8. What emotions have you seen students experiencing most commonly in your classroom since they've been a part of Common Threads classes? → How have you seen them becoming more passionate or curious? How have you become more passionate and curious?
9. What would you and your kids most miss if Common Threads' cooking and gardening programs went away?
10. Is there anything else you want to tell us about how your students or you have been affected by gardening and cooking? Is there anything else that would be helpful for us to know (or that you wish we would have asked.)

Appendix D: Quantitative Questionnaire

Teacher Survey April 2019

In our efforts to better understand the impact of Common Threads programs, and also identify areas for improvement, we'd be grateful for your responses to the following questions no later than April 22. Thank you, in advance, for taking the time to help us learn and grow!

1. Please select your school (drop-down menu)

2. Which grade(s) do you teach? K 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

3. In what food education programs has your class participated this school year?

Fall gardening lessons Winter cooking lessons Spring gardening lessons

Other ways your class participated in food education (including opportunities not with Common Threads): (write-in)

4. Please tell us about what you have noticed about your students' knowledge as a result of Common Threads' lessons:

My students have a better understanding of how to cook safely

Unsure Not at all A little Somewhat Quite a bit Very much

My students have an increased awareness of how their food choices affect personal health

Unsure Not at all A little Somewhat Quite a bit Very much

My students have a better understanding of how to care for a garden

Unsure Not at all A little Somewhat Quite a bit Very much

5. What are the three most important things that your students are learning as a result of Common Threads' lessons? (write-in)

6. Please tell us about what you have noticed about your students' actions as a result of Common Threads' lessons:

My students have increased their consumption of whole foods, particularly fruits and vegetables, at school

Unsure Not at all A little Somewhat Quite a bit Very much

My students take more care to read nutrition labels or investigate the foods they eat in the classroom

Unsure Not at all A little Somewhat Quite a bit Very much

My students' ability to work well in a group has improved

Unsure Not at all A little Somewhat Quite a bit Very much

7. What are the three most important new skills your students have acquired as a result of Common Threads' lessons? (write-in)

8. Please tell us about what you have noticed in your students as a result of Common Threads' lessons:

My students feel more capable to make healthy food choices for themselves

Unsure Not at all A little Somewhat Quite a bit Very much

My students have increased confidence in overcoming barriers to healthy eating

Unsure Not at all A little Somewhat Quite a bit Very much

My students have an increased sense of excitement or adventure when trying new foods or recipes

Unsure Not at all A little Somewhat Quite a bit Very much

My students have an increased appreciation for the garden ecosystem

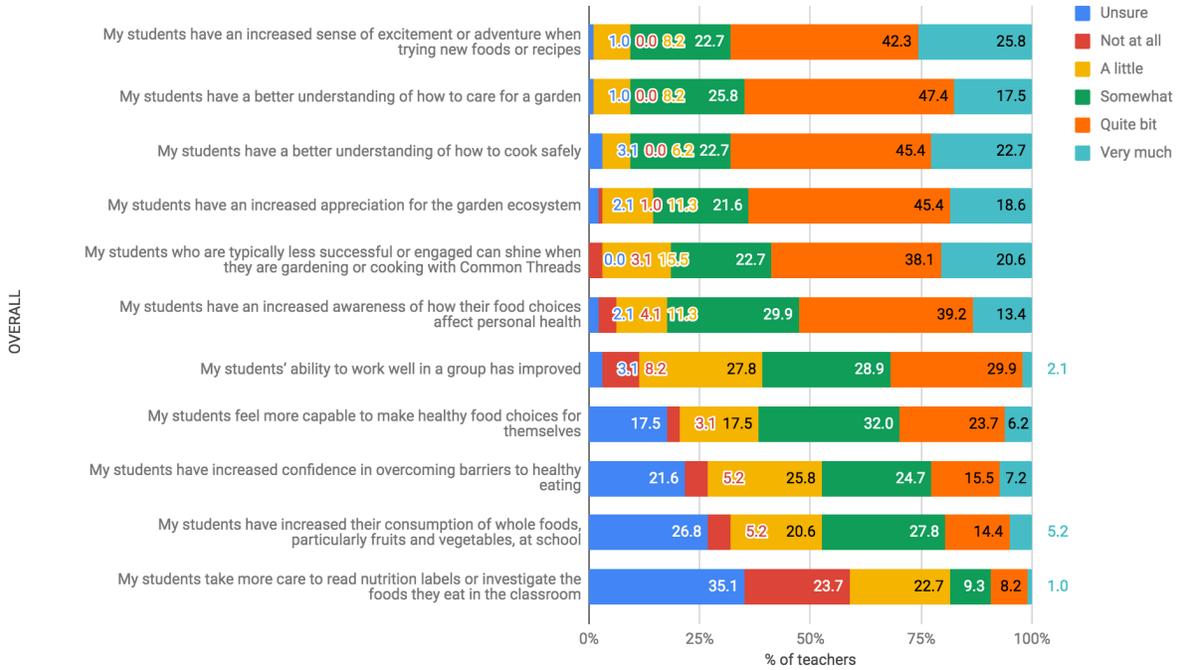
Unsure Not at all A little Somewhat Quite a bit Very much

My students who are typically less successful or engaged can shine when they are gardening or cooking with Common Threads

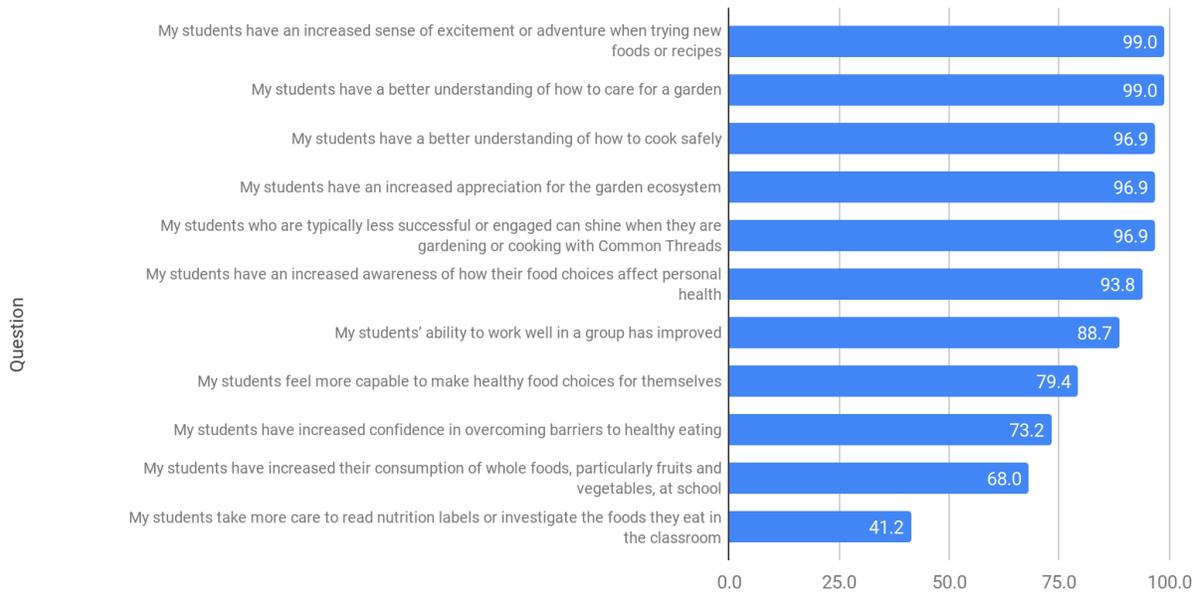
Unsure Not at all A little Somewhat Quite a bit Very much

Appendix E: Summary of Quantitative Survey Results

Quantitative Survey Results from 97 teachers



% of teachers responding with "a little," "somewhat," "quite a bit," and "very much"



Survey responses showing increases in excitement about trying new foods, learning how to care for a garden or cook safely, having the opportunity for students to shine, and working well in a group are consistent with our interview findings. An increased appreciation for the garden ecosystem was a strong response in the survey, though we heard less about this in the interviews, potentially because we were in the midst of cooking season when we conducted many of the interviews. The surveys also showed that teachers perceived students' increased awareness of how their food choices affect their personal health, though we heard this less strongly in the interviews.

Both our interviews and our survey results reflected that teachers did not feel qualified to assess whether students were taking actions to eat healthy foods.

quite a bit or very much vs a little or somewhat

