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## Green thumbs up for school gardens

**Raising veggies after classes offers new skills for students and bounty for local food bank**

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It's often said good things gro-o-ow in On-tar-i-o.

And among the best are the fruits and veggies flourishing in the most unlikely places – the schoolyards behind Sir Sandford Fleming Academy and West Humber C.I. There, a new breed of farmers is growing gardens that nourish body, mind and soul – and supply food banks.



IAN WILLMS/TORONTO STAR

Student Gabriel Crespo, left, PACT director Lucas Goris and son Rilan in garden at Sir Sandford Fleming.

Michael Rose is among the cream of the crop of Fleming students who take time after school to tend to the corn, potatoes, beefy tomatoes, giant zucchinis and dozens of other organically grown goodies. The harvest from Fleming is delivered to the North York Harvest food bank to help feed the hungry in the community. West Humber's goes to another local food bank.

Most days after classes, Rose is on the football field practising with his Charger teammates. Later he and the boys hang up their helmets and grab the gardening tools to really get down and dirty.

"Even the guys who hit hard on the playing field have a soft side and green thumbs," said Rose, 18.

"Seeing everything growing in harmony and picking something fresh from the garden at the end of the day is amazing," he said.

The urban garden is part of Grow to Learn. It took root at Fleming in Toronto's Lawrence Heights neighbourhood as well as at West Humber in Rexdale this past spring. The program was established by PACT, a charity that develops and delivers youth crime prevention programs.

Initially, PACT worked with the courts offering community service programs for kids who had had run-ins with the law. PACT expanded horizons with new programs for students

from the city's marginalized neighbourhoods. The goal is to help at risk youth get involved in something they're passionate about before they get in trouble.

Breaking the cycle of violence early by helping kids learn important life-skills that will set them on a positive path is the charity's raison d'etre,said David Lockett, PACT co-founder and volunteer president. Expanding into the schools made sense, he said. The gardening program is also helping meet the desperate need for fresh produce at local food banks said Lockett.

Fleming principal Arnold Witt knew Grow to Learn was ideal for his high school where students were already keen on the PACT cooking program.

Gabriel Crespo, 17, took up gardening "to do something for the school." He spent many hours after classes planting trees at Fleming – more than 25.

Jake Wolfman, 15, is in the garden every day after class and practice. He even spent time working there during his summer vacation.