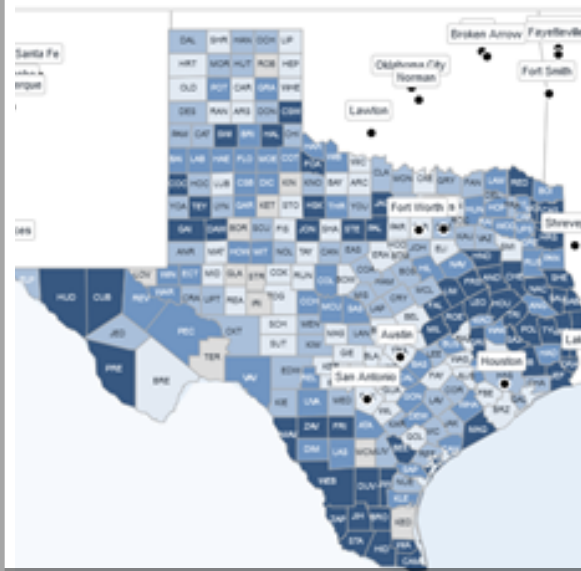


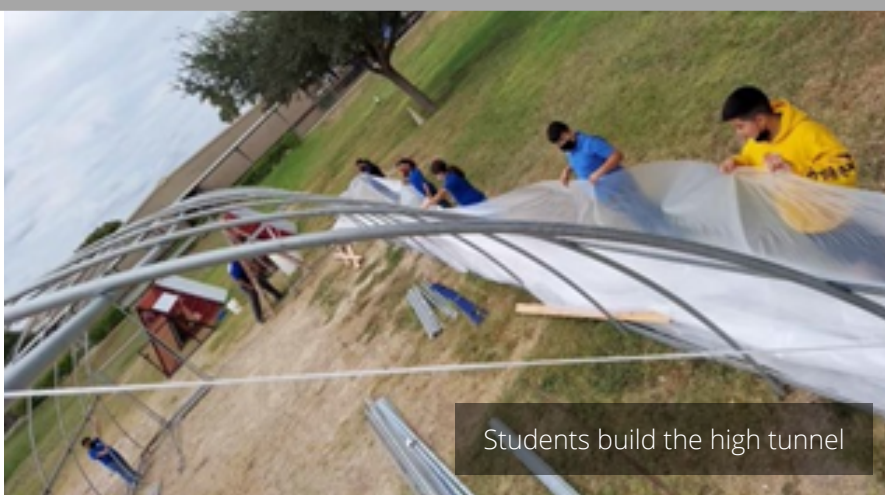
South Texas Elementary Goes for G.R.E.E.N. with Expanded Farm

AT A GLANCE

Located in Escobares, TX, R.T. Barrera Elementary has expanded its school and community-led school garden into a farm. Through in-kind donations, community and school volunteers, and CDC-HOP-Farm to School Funding, the school has added farm animals and an orchard that helps promote healthy eating and physical activity. Wanting to expand its efforts even further, the school applied for and received funding through PROJECT G.R.E.E.N. to add a pollinator garden and high tunnel. R.T. Barrera Elementary received technical assistance from Texas A&M Agrilife Extension for their application.



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. County Health Rankings: Health Factors Overall Rank. <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org>



Students build the high tunnel

APPROACH

For 9 years, R.T. Barrera Elementary School has cultivated a love of agriculture in its students through its Eagle's Garden. The garden began as a grant-funded project in 2012, and the school has grown the program to include farm animals (through community in-kind donations) and an orchard (through 2019-2021 CDC-HOP Farm-to-School supplemental funding). The enterprise now known as the Funny Farm promotes both physical activity as students work to plant, weed, harvest, and care for animals and healthy eating as students try new produce. Still, the school wanted to grow its farm to school program further.

In Spring 2020, the school applied for and received a Project G.R.E.E.N. (Growing Roots for Education, Environment and Nutrition) grant through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. The \$9,500 grant supported two new projects: a pollinator garden and construction of a high tunnel. The school's goal was to increase the pollinator population in the area to help with production in the high tunnel and support nearby community vegetable gardens--all while teaching 3rd - 5th grade students the art of sustainable agriculture.

PUBLIC HEALTH CHALLENGE

R.T. Barrera Elementary in Escobares, Texas, near the Texas-Mexico border, is located in a food desert. With a median family income of \$26,250 (2019 5-year ACS), Escobares has a 54.1% poverty rate and half of household receive SNAP benefits. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation noted that 22% of Starr County residents experience food insecurity and 33% have limited access to food. Starr County ranks 213 of 254 Texas counties in terms of health behaviors and 243 in overall health factors. In fact, 100% of the schools in Starr County fall under the USDA Community Eligibility Provision (CEP). Within this context, the school and its community strive to:

- a) Improve dietary behaviors of individuals and families by increasing and improving access to and availability of healthy food; and
- b) Increase access and opportunities for individuals and families to be physically active through improved access to and availability of outdoor places for such activities.



Working on Wellness Environments is a program of Texas A&M Agrilife Extension made possible with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

RESULTS

While school officials were able to work with NRCS and AgriLife staff to plan the pollinator garden and high tunnel during the pandemic, pandemic challenges prevented construction. Throughout Summer and Fall 2021, the school constructed the 8 raised beds for the pollinator garden and constructed the 48' high tunnel. A local botanist helped select native plants and suggested an appropriate layout for the pollinator beds. Students water the new garden (and care for the existed garden and orchard) almost daily. Students, as well as staff and community members, had a hand in building the high tunnel. They continue to prepare the soil and are planning for spring crops

The high tunnel will allow the school to sustainably produce a wider variety of fresh fruits and vegetables through a longer growing season and more controlled environment and will improve access to healthy foods throughout the community by supplying high tunnel produce to students' families and a nearby farmer's market. The pollinator garden increases the presence of butterflies and other pollinators in the area, benefiting both the Funny Farm and the surrounding community. In addition to supplying local youth and their families with healthy foods and promoting healthy physical activity, 3rd – 5th graders are learning and applying agricultural and science skills.



Students take a picture in front of the high tunnel they just built

- Leveraged Funds**
- 3/1/2020-6/1/2020**
- \$2,134 in meeting space
 - \$9,498 in NRCS G.R.E.E.N Grant
 - \$41,988 school, staff, business donations
- 6/1/2020- 8/1/2021**
- \$11,025 in landscaping time
 - \$4,818 in general volunteer hours
 - \$570 in donations
 - \$1,920 in plumbing expertise/time
 - \$160 in volunteer botanist
 - \$7,700 in carpenter time
 - \$560 in Master Gardener time
 - \$2,310 in Backhoe services
 - \$259 in transportation
 - \$1,757 in maintenance department time
 - \$140 in welder time



Students care for the new pollinator garden at RT Barrera Elementary.

SUSTAINING SUCCESS

With technical assistance from Texas A&M Agrilife Extension, the Funny Farm is in the process of building an operations manual that can help sustain the farm. As noted in the leveraged funds, the farm has strong community and volunteer support that can help sustain it.

Trees added to Orchard:

- 4 Mandarin
- 3 Guava
- 7 Fig
- 6 Lime
- 4 Grapefruit
- 4 Peach
- 9 Orange
- 6 Grape

Partners:

- R.T. Barrera Elementary
- Roma ISD
- Texas A&M Agrilife Extension
- 4H Leaders
- Benito Trevino Botany
- Master Gardeners
- RGCCISD
- Lowe's Home Improvement

Additional Resources

- <https://www.facebook.com/roma.isd/posts/2250518595083469>
- <https://twitter.com/romaisd/status/1408489022914236416>