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Volunteers at work

Kahakai Elementary garden gets a helping hand

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The earthy smell of freshly turned soil mingled with the spicy, pepper scent of just-plucked basil Monday morning, as volunteers from Kaiser Permanente descended on the school's garden for weeding, pruning and picking.

Several dozen volunteers, including Kaiser employees, their spouses and their children, as well as teachers and school workers, arrived at Kahakai Elementary School to help with the school garden. The volunteer effort was part of Kaiser's nationwide Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service events, said Kaiser's Associate Medical Director for Neighbor Islands, Dr. Daryl Kurozawa.

"We're realizing that much of health lifelong is centered in childhood," Kurozawa said.

School garden programs, like the one at Kahakai, where students plant, care for and harvest produce such as tomatoes, lettuce and Swiss chard, is a perfect tie-in to Kaiser's 5-2-1-0 program, he added. The program encourages children to eat five or more fruits and vegetables per day, two hours or less "screen time," one hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity and zero sodas and sugar-sweetened sports and fruit drinks.

"The school garden program educates children and families about healthy lifestyles," Kurozawa said. "The children will do it at school and bring it home."

Kaiser physicians and employees were also scheduled to work on Waimea Middle School's garden and Ka Umeke Kaeo Charter School in Hilo, as well as at sites on Oahu and Maui.

Tasks at Kahakai ranged from harvesting huge piles of basil -- enough to fill three large garbage bags -- to cutting up and removing sod from the perimeter of the school's garden to create beds for more plants. As adults were handed shovels, wheelbarrows and hoes to move dirt and create new plant beds, children sat in the shade, pulling leaves from basil stems.

Sod pulled from the fence line was set aside to be reused elsewhere; the basil stems, once the leaves were gone, will be used as compost to fertilize the garden. The work being done Monday wasn't just expanding planting space, Parent Community Network Coordinator Eliana Sattler said, but also preparing the garden beds for the upcoming February planting.



Elimar Utrera, left, and Luka Wohl, both 7, work together pulling weeds at Kahakai Elementary School's garden for Kaiser Permanente's Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service on Monday. - Photo By Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today



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Nancy Redfeather picks through a pile of basil from Kahakai Elementary School's garden on Monday. - Photo By Laura Shimabuku | Special To West Hawaii Today

Now, fifth-grade students harvest, wash, bag and sell the produce they grow at a weekly farmers market, at 7 a.m. in front of the school's main office, Sattler said. The students also develop a business plan and decide how to use the money. One of the goals Monday was to create enough space for fourth-graders to plant traditional Hawaiian plants, including taro and gourds; the kindergarten classes plan to grow sunflowers, she added.

Dawn Koehler, a Kaiser employee, didn't know much about the school garden program when she received the invitation to the volunteer day.

"It's part of what we want to do, get into the community and support their projects," Koehler said as she pulled plants out of the soil. "This is so cool. To find out that they package it and sell it -- (it is) a good idea. And on top of that, they learn how good it is for you."

Gary Orton, whose wife works for Kaiser, said the garden and the volunteer project were great.

"Some kids learn differently," he said, barely pausing as he hammered a machete-like knife into sod. "They learn better by getting their hands on it."