

## Adding zing to school lunches in Hartford

### Lincoln students enjoy local produce for salsa, burgers

By SARAH MANN

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HARTFORD — Fourth grade just got a little spicy.

Students in Amber Kuchinski's fourth-grade class at Lincoln Elementary School were raking in the jalapeno peppers Wednesday morning in preparation for lunch that afternoon. Kuchinski's class is responsible for harvesting fresh produce from the school's vegetable garden, tucked into a small corner at the back of the school and bursting with tomatoes, zucchini and peppers.

Gardening is a great learning activity for the kids, but it's a sneaky way of meeting federal lunch standards and saving money at the same time, said Hartford Jt. 1 Food Service Director Jill Piontek.

"To get the fresh local stuff — it tastes so much better," Piontek said. "The cost savings, too — what does it cost to water a garden?"

This is Lincoln Elementary's first year of gathering produce; Piontek piloted a garden a couple of years ago at Rossman Elementary School but added a plot to Lincoln this year after the district received a grant from the Healthy People Project of Washington County.

The gardens have become the source of much of the vegetables that federal regulations stipulate must be served in school lunches.

"We usually go outside once in a while and pick the veggies," fourth-grader Renee Hmircik said. The most fun part, she said, is "being able to pick it and then watch them make it."

"It" in this case was homemade garden salsa. As soon as students brought in their bounty from the garden, Piontek was dicing tomatoes and jalapenos. The onions she added weren't grown in the garden but were procured from local farmers. With a little salt, pepper, garlic and lemon juice, students had fresh salsa from plants that had been on the vine just minutes ago. Piontek planned to serve that batch with the cheese quesadillas being offered for school lunch later that day.

"If anybody had the cheeseburger yesterday, with the lettuce and tomato, those (tomatoes) were from the garden," Piontek said.

That holds true across the district and even at some of the parochial schools in town; Lincoln and Rossman's gardens supply vegetables for both of those schools as well as Central Middle School, Neosho School and even Peace Lutheran School. It's a large load but

doable, thanks to the fourth-graders.

“They get so excited,” Piontek said. “We kept hearing (I don’t garden), but my grandparents do. ... This generation doesn’t grow.”

What the schools don’t grow is secured from local farmers. Piontek is dedicated to making sure that vegetables she feeds her students are organic and local. Her costs are offset by the produce from the gardens.

“We get our vegetables fresh and we don’t buy them from the store,” fourth-grader Cameron Simmons said proudly.



**Sarah Mann/Daily News Staff**

Fourth-grade students at Lincoln Elementary School cart in their harvest from the school’s garden Wednesday morning in Hartford. They used the tomatoes and peppers to make salsa which was served to the school later that day.



**Sarah Mann/Daily News Staff**

Fourth-grader Cameron Simmons grins as he eats a mouthful of chips and salsa

Wednesday morning at Lincoln Elementary School in Hartford.

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