



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE
University of Alaska Fairbanks

Youths grow and sample vegetables from school gardens in CYFAR program



Children, Youth, and Families At-Risk Program

Many Alaska youth live in urban food deserts, or remote communities where fresh fruits and vegetables are difficult to find or prohibitively expensive. Eating fresh vegetables helps promote healthy eating. Planting and growing vegetables teaches children where their food comes from. Sharing the food they've grown with families and classmates instills a sense of pride.

The five-year Growing Knowledgeable and Health-Conscious Generation in Alaska program is designed to improve youth and family physical activity and eating

behaviors, nutrition knowledge, and plant science knowledge. The program, designed for youths in grades 3-5, uses evidence-based curricula, including Learn, Grow, Eat, & Go! and Junior Master Gardener. Youth participating in these curricula have shown reductions in BMI and improvements in eating and physical activity behaviors.

Four Alaska schools are participating in the Children, Youth, and Families At-Risk (CYFAR) Program, which provides after-school gardening enrichment. The program is supported by the University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service and organizations such as Soil and Water Conservation Districts and Master Gardeners. The schools are in the Interior Alaska communities of Anderson and Eagle; and two Anchorage schools, Alaska Native Cultural Charter School and Rogers Park Elementary School.

These schools started indoor hydroponic systems and also developed or revived outdoor garden beds. Since Alaska's growing season is short, three schools are building greenhouses. Youth meet weekly or bi-weekly for activities such as planting fall and spring vegetable gardens, keeping garden journals and blogging, tasting fresh vegetables, trying easy vegetable recipes, preparing and participating in 4-H food contests, creating family stories aligned with Alaska Teaching Standard (English/Spanish), and family nights.

Anderson School

Anderson is a community of about 175 people 50 miles north of Denali National Park. School enrollment in 2025-26 consisted of four students in pre-kindergarten and 13 K-12. Another eight homeschooled students also participate in 4-H projects. One classroom serves as a plant room with three hydroponic towers that were installed in 2023. Most of the plants froze in winter 2025-26 due to a record cold winter with temperatures 40 to 50 degrees below zero, CYFAR site coordinator Beth Norman said.

When the plants were producing, Norman said students sampled kale, Swiss chard, spinach and lettuces. "Sometimes the kids just walk down the hall with tomatoes," Norman said. "The best thing for them was getting to see the fruits of their labor. 'Wow, I planted that and I get to eat it.'" Students designed and helped build a 20-by-49-by-8-foot greenhouse, with extra bracing to withstand heavy snowloads. Starter plants died when a wildfire threatened Anderson in early summer 2026. A Fairbanks greenhouse and community gardeners replaced them for free.



Eagle Community School

Eagle is a remote community of fewer than 80 people on the south bank of the Yukon River, eight miles from the Canadian border. There is no road access from October to April. Small planes transport people and goods, weather permitting.

Eagle Community School has 16 students. The entire school is a 4-H club. Many people in the community move elsewhere over winter, and students take care of their houseplants in classrooms as a 4-H service project. According to teacher Kristy Robbins, the project teaches responsibility and plant care. Students also grow tomatoes and other plants hydroponically.

Fresh vegetables are unavailable in the community unless they're flown in at great expense.

"They grow it. We eat it all winter long. We don't get fresh stuff," Robbins said. Students and community volunteers installed a

22-foot-long greenhouse on a former ice rink behind the school in fall 2025. They used a leaf blower to keep the snow cleared. This spring, students planned to start a compost pile.

Alaska Native Cultural Charter School

The Alaska Native Cultural Charter School in Anchorage incorporates traditional Alaska Native values in the classroom. About 12 students are active in the gardening club, which is led by fifth-grade teacher Dan Greenwood and Emily Becker, district manager of the Anchorage Soil and Water Conservation District. In addition to vegetables such as Swiss chard, students are also growing native plants like salmonberries and lupine, as well as nasturtiums in the hydroponic system they helped set up in the classroom. Greenwood said he considers it a success when a student tells him "I have a new favorite food."

"That's the whole goal for me," he said. "It's getting kids to eat good food and to know that food comes from the ground and not just the grocery store."

Rogers Park Elementary School

Rogers Park Elementary is in an older Anchorage neighborhood. About 30 students are in the gardening, which meets twice monthly, CYFAR coordinator Michele Cateson said.

The kids have various interests – planting, harvesting, watering. "One kid was all about the worms." They grew tomatoes, which got so large the youth extracted and repotted the plants. "At the end of the day, they don't want to sit and do a worksheet," Cateson said. "They want to do something active. That's our goal, to have as much hands-on stuff as we can," she said.

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