

Educator uses agriculture to plant seeds for developing life skills

By Kylie Coble

In today's society, it is common for teenagers to be absent or careless when it comes to matters involving the environment. Heidi Albin has worked to change that and is continuing to do so.

Albin teaches science and serves as character education coordinator at Complete Maize High School, an alternative high school in Sedgwick County where students still have to meet the same curriculum as other students in their district. CMSH maintains a 60-student enrollment limit to ensure each student gets the correct attention and to enable the staff to attend to each student's learning style. A smaller setting also allows for many student learning activities to be "hands-on" projects.

Albin's upbringing on a farm helped her come up with the idea to integrate environmental education with character education. She recalled how, by getting to care for animals and to work outside, she learned patience, responsibility, compassion, integrity, and problem-solving skills.

"Nature contains countless visceral object lessons about life and I believe it is one of the greatest teachers of character," Albin said.

Kids and teenagers today do not gain the same experience and life lessons from nature that past generations of children did. Albin explained that her goal of integrating environmental education with character education was consequently to "combine the curriculum that I believe is most important (character wise) with the activities that I believe most engage student learning (activities in nature and with other living organisms)."

One project the students at CMSH carry out involves maintaining their school garden, which was made possible through a grant of \$10,000 from the Kansas Association for

Conservation and Environmental Education. Working in the garden helps students to gain life skills through learning about the planning, planting, maintaining, and harvesting that's involved.

You can also catch CMSH students hatching duck, chicken, or quail eggs each year. The students care for the chicks, and once they complete a research project, they are allowed to take home two chicks.

"Students learn the value of life, compassion, responsibility, patience, commitment, and problem solving during their two weeks with the chicks," Albin said.

She said she believes "concepts are best learned when you can see them in action."

Albin sees that first-hand when her students take home their cute, new baby chicks.

At first, the students often underestimate how much work will go into caring for the chicks. However, after a few nights, they tend to better understand what's needed to meet their chick's needs. In time, Albin said, some students even allow the chicks to sleep in small boxes next to them in their own bed!

The projects and hard work done by the students at CMSH have impacted their personal lives.

One of Albin's students, Hillary, said: "Having a garden at the school has helped me learn more responsibility for my health and for our environment. I have learned that I have the responsibility and power to make my own food decisions in ways that respect the planet."

Albin hopes to continue integrating character education with environmental education.

And while a lack of time may keep her from taking the project as far as she would like, she said, "I hope that in the future I can write a more comprehensive lesson unit combining character education and environmental science and share it with other teachers."

For now, though, she would love to share what she has come up with so far!

