

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Elena Christian Jr. High School Reaps Abundant Sweet Potato Harvest

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ST. CROIX -- It seemed a normal school day at the Elena Christian Jr. High School on Thursday, and for most of the students, it was.

But for those who make up the school's agriculture class, it was anything but.

Tucked away behind the walls of the junior high school's north side classrooms, is the school's garden, where about seven students plowed through a long row of dirt on Thursday morning, excitedly reaping dozens of sweet potatoes that had matured and were ready to be harvested. Students came ready with their tools, including a potato fork, buckets to rest the potatoes in, and a barrow to haul them away.

Two students told The Consortium that they were proud members of the roughly 40-busy harvesting to bother with the camera.



ECJHS agriculture students reap sweet potato

harvest. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

ECJHS Principal Carlos McGregor said the program, led by instructor Stanley Farrelly, has been active in the school for four years. "As you can see, we are harvesting quite a bit of sweet potatoes this morning," Mr. McGregor said. "We're quite pleased with our agriculture program and what they're doing." The program started at the school's [former location](#), and has continued strong, with the garden boasting lemon grass plants, basil, cucumbers and of course sweet potatoes.

Yesterday's harvest was impressive, as was made evident by the barrowload of sweet potatoes collected. Mr. McGregor said some of the potatoes would be shared among agriculture students as well as the school's cafeteria to be used as part of a meal.

Out of the 40 students assigned to the agriculture class, just over half show high interest, says Mr. Farrelly. Mr. McGregor said the idea is to expose the students to a variety of career paths, and in the process some have realized that agriculture offers more than meets the eye.

"They start to realize that agriculture is more than just digging in the ground; it's veterinary services, USDA products and a whole lot of other things associated with agriculture. It's a science," he said.



ECJHS sweet potato harvest

The class, fully defined as agro-science, at the junior high level sees students learning about the basics of agriculture and the importance of it in everyday life, Mr. Farrelly said. He said students learn about the crops as well as the other industries that are intricately tied to agriculture, even though such integration is not apparent. Some examples include clothing, building materials and pharmaceutical drugs. "All those things are provided for us through agriculture," he said.

Department of Education Assistant Commissioner Charmaine Hobson, who attended in the D.O.E. commissioner's stead, said as she stood looking at the students harvest, she pondered a full integration of the agriculture course in all the territory's schools, as the course itself ties into multiple other subjects. "There's math involved in this, there's science involved in this -- there's even history involved in this. They can write about this, poetry about this, skits about this," she said.

Ms. Hobson also appreciated Mr. Farrelly's efforts in attempting to generate interest among the youth in agriculture. An important effort, she said, as it will remain with the students for a lifetime and allow them to pass on their skills. And she praised the commissioners of Agriculture and Education, Carlos Robles and Sharon McCollum respectively, crediting them for reviving agriculture, which she said had faded and was almost nonexistent.

"What they're doing is fantastic because now it's like a re-burst of agriculture in the schools, and especially at the elementary level, where you see all the schools have little gardens," Ms. Hobson said.