



HELEN SNODGRASS

A school garden shows what can happen when a network of inspired educators takes root.

Like many urban schools, YES Prep North Forest is located in a “food desert” in Houston, Texas—a neighborhood with limited access to grocery stores or fresh food. Helen Snodgrass became aware of the broader implications of this crisis when she began teaching high school biology at the school four years ago. “The more I talked to my students about their eating habits, the more I found that they had no idea where their food came from and how it could impact their health,” she says.

Snodgrass, a 2010 KSTF Teaching Fellow, turned to the KSTF community for suggestions and support. Ultimately, she came up with the idea of planting a garden in the school’s central courtyard, a project which was funded by a KSTF grant. Armed with knowledge from the KSTF network, Snodgrass worked with her students to decide what they were going to plant, to select materials, and to design and build the garden. They have since held a farmers’ market to sell the produce they have grown and shared lessons about nutrition with school families. “We had kids who had never tried a strawberry,” she says. “Now parents are telling us the garden is affecting the way they eat at home. In some ways, the impact of the garden might be more lasting than the impact of some of the lessons I teach in my classroom.”

For Snodgrass, the knowledge shared by other science teachers in the KSTF community made the garden project a reality. “I had a network of teachers who had started gardens at their schools to help me think about how it could work in my context,” she says. “It was the only reason it happened.”

Having started tutoring in elementary school, Snodgrass worked in a research lab and considered medical school before realizing that teaching was her calling. “I realized I loved science, but also loved interacting with people and sharing that

Helen Snodgrass

AP Biology Teacher, YES Prep North Forest, Houston, Texas

- YES Prep Science Content Specialist
- Former dean of instruction, ninth grade level chair, instructional support specialist
- Founded school garden, three-minute observation club
- Facilitator of professional development for new science teachers in Yes Prep network
- Participant, Biological Sciences Curriculum Study (BSCS)/National Association of Biology Teachers (NABT) AP Biology Leadership Academy
- National Science Teachers Association (NSTA) New Science Teacher Fellow
- Woodrow Wilson Teaching Fellow
- NABT 2014 Outstanding New Biology Teacher of the Year
- Published “The Perspectives of High-Achieving Women on Teaching” in *The New Educator* journal

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TEACHER PROFILE

excitement," she says. Introduced to KSTF during her time in the Stanford Teacher Education Program, Snodgrass says the Fellowship became invaluable after she began teaching at YES Prep North Forest.

"A lot of people will find a network of really passionate, motivated teachers in their grad program, but they will leave to teach and not have the same motivating network in their local context," she says. "Something that would keep me engaged and keep me learning was very important for me."

Leslie Stiles, YES Prep's director of science, says that Snodgrass is continuing to do just that. "It's clear that Helen is still a student herself," she says. "She is up to date and always sharing information about the latest trends and best practices in science education. In addition to pushing students to master the content, she has the ability to push each individual student to grow and become a better science student."

In her four years at North Forest, Snodgrass has served as a grade-level chair, dean of instruction, and an instructional support specialist. She founded a three-minute observation club, in which teachers informally reflected upon and discussed their instruction. She has also presented professional development across the YES Prep network and facilitated professional development for new science teachers, a role that expanded this year when she became YES Prep's content specialist for science. While charter schools often place relatively new teachers into leadership roles, Snodgrass says it was her work with KSTF that gave her the confidence to lead. "Everything is geared toward helping you be a leader in an educational setting, and the KSTF network gives you a safe environment to test your leadership skills," she says.

Many of the concerns voiced by teachers—low pay and professional standing, and limited opportunities for professional development—are addressed by the KSTF Fellowship, she says. "If you don't have those things, it's much harder to stay in teaching. The constant inspiration of new ideas has been invaluable to me. The amazing work I see my peers in KSTF doing shows me how much more I have to learn, which keeps me motivated."

- Contributed a classroom task and reflections on implementation to *5 Practices for Orchestrating Productive Task-Based Discussions in Science* (NSTA Press)
- Presenter, 2013 NABT Professional Development Conference
- Featured on Bloomberg Radio Honor Roll and Huffington Post, and in Houston Woman Magazine

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