States Demand That Colleges Show How Well Their Students Learn

By Dan Berrett

Some of the hallmarks of No Child Left Behind are creeping into higher education.

The 2002 law was intended to hold elementary and secondary schools accountable for improving the academic achievement of all students. It has come to be reviled by many teachers for what they see as a narrowing of the curriculum to the material covered on standardized tests, and for punishing schools for their students’ performance.

Professors often invoke the law in objecting to calls for increased oversight—which they fear will come from the federal government or accreditors—as a cautionary tale of accountability run amok. But it is in the states, some of which are requiring colleges to demonstrate what their students are learning, that the real action is taking place.

Most of the efforts under way in a dozen states, still in their early stages, seek to answer mounting concerns about academic rigor in college. Two states are already using student surveys and standardized tests to document learning—and attaching financial rewards to the results.

Missouri, for example, awards a small share of its support to colleges on the basis of how well their students score on standardized tests. Pennsylvania includes data from the deep-learning-scales portion of the National Survey of Student Engagement in its formula for performance-based appropriations. South Carolina is developing learning metrics for educational quality that will be tied to state support.

Other states are bolstering their oversight of what happens in class. Professors who teach classes of 300 or more at Iowa’s three public universities must report to administrators on how they assess learning; the information is sent to the state's Board of Regents.

The effort that may prove to be the most consequential, a nine-state consortium led by Massachusetts, is seeking to avoid the types of flaws that critics have seen in the 2002 law. Professors and state and college officials are adapting an existing faculty-developed tool to
assess students' work, which they hope can be rated on a common scale and compared across disciplines, colleges, and state systems.

"We are a publicly supported set of institutions," says Richard M. Freeland, commissioner of higher education in Massachusetts. "We need to be accountable to the state for our outcomes."

**Money for Scores**

States' growing interest in student learning reflects several trends. The national effort to produce more college graduates, often referred to as the completion agenda, has raised worries that the pressure to push more students through the education pipeline will cause academic quality to diminish.

Meanwhile, the formulas by which many states support their colleges have grown increasingly sophisticated, with money being awarded on the basis of more and more data points.

Several college provosts in Missouri said they suggested including student learning in the state's new performance-based formula. An externally validated standardized test, many of them argued, would indicate rigor more objectively than an internal measure, like grade-point average, which can be inflated.

"We wanted to make sure there was quality assurance along with performance funding," says Douglas N. Dunham, provost of Northwest Missouri State University. Hypothetically, he says, "there could be a temptation to lower standards in order to get other categories elevated."

**Missouri's colleges can choose the criteria on which they want their students' learning to be judged. Six of the institutions, including the University of Missouri, use the results of professional licensure tests, in such fields as accounting, nursing, and teaching, to gauge how well their students fare in their majors.**

The University of Central Missouri, Northwest Missouri State, and Missouri Western State University have chosen to be evaluated on the basis of their general-education offerings. They opted for the same standardized test: the Educational Testing Service's Proficiency Profile, an assessment of mathematics, reading, and writing.

The tests are not a result of the new system of performance-based appropriations. Northwest Missouri State has used the Proficiency Profile, or one its precursors, since 1994 as an externally validated measure of learning. All of its students must take the test early in their junior year.

Many professors there had long wondered why the university bothered with the expense and logistics of administering the test, says Joel D. Benson, a professor of history and president of the Faculty Senate. "The only thing that we were sort of in opposition to," he says, "was why are we going through all this if it isn't going to mean anything?"

This year it will mean $186,000 in new money from the state, because more than 60 percent of Northwest Missouri State's students scored above the median on the test.
The university tries to raise the stakes for students to encourage them to take the test seriously. Those who fare poorly on the two-hour test must take it again. When students try harder, it is thought to provide institutions with better data. Otherwise, says Mr. Dunham, "you'll get students coming in and filling out boxes."

Other institutions attach tougher consequences—at least on paper. The University of Central Missouri uses the Proficiency Profile as an exit exam. To graduate, students must score at least 425, which is slightly below the lowest level of proficiency, out of a possible 500.

About 98 percent of Central Missouri's students pass the test, says Carole E. Nimmer, director of testing services, and they are allowed to take it as many as four times. No one has been denied graduation because of the test.

The importance that standardized tests have assumed troubles some professors, says Mr. Benson. Faculty members do not know what is on the Proficiency Profile, he notes, and so they don't tailor their class material to it; hence no one expresses much concern about teaching to the test.

Mr. Benson points to a larger context as well: Missouri's support for higher education has yet to recover from recent cuts. Therefore additional money, even if it is linked to performance-based appropriations, is better than nothing.

"You have to recognize there are political realities," he says. "It may be a standardized test, but it's a standardized test that supports general education."

Other Missouri institutions, like Truman State University, use a combination of internally developed rubrics and standardized tests to evaluate their students' success. Troy D. Paino, president of Truman State, sees value in the assessments, which he says have sparked a broader conversation on campus, particularly about critical thinking.

But he worries about the embrace of performance-based appropriations, which can quickly reward and punish on the basis of data that often reflect slow-moving trends.

"People want to find some kind of silver bullet that's going to improve the quality of education, and they think performance funding is going to turn things around," he says. "It's not going to work that way."

The Power of Numbers

Missouri is one of the nine states in the consortium being led by Massachusetts. The others are Connecticut, Indiana, Kentucky, Minnesota, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Utah.

Officials in Missouri hope the group's efforts will produce a tool to measure learning that surpasses the current array of standardized tests.

The group's starting point is the Value rubrics of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. They emerged as a faculty-developed response to the concerns about quality raised
by the higher-education commission created in 2005 by the secretary of education, Margaret Spellings. More than 1,000 institutions use the rubrics, says the association, which is also participating in the consortium.

The consortium is adapting three of the association's rubrics: in critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and writing. Those skills are divided into component parts, each of which can be judged by faculty on a scale of one to four. The hope is that each category within those rubrics, which reflect qualitative judgment calls, can be converted to a quantitative measure like a point system, which could be generalized and compared across departments, institutions, and states.

The virtue of the rubrics, say participants in the effort, is that they reflect common standards but are based on the work that students actually produce. Standardized tests may offer uniformity, but they are not tied to the curriculum.

"If we can make this work, we will have accomplished something rather large in higher education," says Patricia H. Crosson, senior adviser for academic policy at the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education and a professor emerita of higher education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

The consortium's efforts could accomplish several goals at once, says Carol Geary Schneider, president of the association. Higher education would have a clear, understandable way to describe learning that would be more nuanced and meaningful than standardized tests, while also giving faculty members tools that truly help improve teaching.

"We're trying to wean higher education from the simple and often deceptive number," she says.

But numbers, even those built on faculty-vetted qualitative judgments like the rubrics, have a way of acquiring their own force. Once a number starts to be treated as a definitive measure of truth, it is tempting to tie it to other numbers—like a dollar value.

Mr. Freeland, the Massachusetts higher-education commissioner, envisions the rubrics' numbers one day feeding his state's performance-based formula, though that day is far-off.

"It is just so rational," he says, "to link performance to at least a significant component of your budget."
Steve Owens is University of Missouri System’s go-to, fill-in leadership guy.

First he was interim president of the system. Now the university system’s general counsel has been named interim boss of the Columbia campus.

UM System President Tim Wolfe on Monday announced the appointment of Owens as interim chancellor for MU. Owens will run the university with Deputy Chancellor Mike Middleton until a permanent chancellor is hired. Neither Owens nor Middleton are candidates to fill the job more permanently.

The Owens/Middleton transition team has been approved by the University of Missouri Board of Curators. The two take control the evening of November 15, when current Chancellor Brady Deaton officially steps down. Deaton will remain at the university as the executive director of the Brady and Anne Deaton Institute for Leadership in International Development. The institute will look for alternative ways to influence international food safety and water quality.

Curators said having a transition team in place gives the 18-member chancellor search committee and the system president time to find the chancellor that best fits the University of Missouri.

“Our search for a new chancellor at MU remains on schedule,” Wolfe said in a statement. “In the meantime, it is imperative that the daily operations of the university continue to run smoothly.”

Owens had been interim system president for a year between the time that former president Gary Forsee left and when Wolfe was hired.

In that time — January 2011 to February 2012 — Owens worked closely with Deaton to move Mizzou from the Big 12 Conference to the Southeastern Conference. He also launched a search that led to the hiring of Cheryl Schrader as the first female chancellor at Missouri University of Science and Technology in Rolla.
Owens became general counsel to the system in 2008. While Owens is temporarily in the chancellor’s office, Phil Hoskins will serve as acting general counsel for the system.

Read more here: http://www.kansascity.com/2013/10/28/4582597/interim-chancellor-selected-for.html#storylink=cpy
MU Extension office considers move to fairground

By Jodie Jackson Jr.

Tuesday, October 29, 2013 at 2:00 pm

A recommendation to relocate the University of Missouri Extension office at Midway to the Central Missouri Events Center just north of Columbia could be part of a long-term plan to maintain and improve the events center, formerly known as the Boone County Fairgrounds.

That idea was presented last night to a task force studying the future use of the events center. The public forum at the Boone County Government Center came after a series of three public forums throughout the county last week.

Vicky Miserez, chairwoman of the University Extension Council, said the council has recommended relocation of the current office off Route UU because the facility is landlocked and "has some limitations." The Extension Council also recommends calling the proposed new building the Frank Graham Community Education and Resource Center in honor of former Boone County Commissioner Frank Graham, who died Sept. 20 at the age of 93.

"What we've done is dreamed with no limits," Miserez said, pointing out that the relocation idea is in "the incubation stage." The facility would include offices, conference rooms, demonstration gardens and other features on a roughly 10-acre spot within the 134-acre events center property.

Paying for the construction and relocation would be another discussion.

"There would be a lot of expense involved with that," Miserez added.

Including a new MU Extension facility as part of a long-term plan for events center improvements and growth was an idea that many of the 25 people in attendance latched onto.

Task force Chairman Roger Wilson said having the facility at the fairground property would provide "better urban access," and horse trainer Lynn Frazee said drawing both urban and rural kids to activities at the events center could help them "learn about things other than hanging around on the street."
Others pointed out that the city plans to extend bus service to the site.

Additional ideas for use of the venue, which hosts the Boone County Fair for one week in July and 40 weekends of events this year, include making improvements to bring in more and bigger horse shows, car shows and other events.

TAG Events, the current manager of the county-owned property, will end its management contract June 30.

"We understand the public benefit" of the events center, Wilson said. "So is it worth a subsidy" from the county?

The task force is supposed to present a report and recommendations to the Boone County Commission by Dec. 3.

Deborah Booker, who organizes the annual rock and lapidary show — after organizing horse shows at the venue for several years — said the county's current operating subsidy of around $250,000 is less than $2 per county resident.

"You almost can't buy a cup of coffee for that," Booker said. "I don't know what people are fussing about."
Ike Skelton, a conservative Democrat who represented Missouri in the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years, died Monday in Arlington, Va. He was 81.

Skelton died at Virginia Hospital Center, surrounded by his wife, his sons and their families as well as longtime colleague Russell Orban, who confirmed the death. The cause was not immediately released, but Orban said Skelton entered the hospital a week earlier with a bad cough.

Skelton was a military expert who served as chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and was a protector of military bases in Missouri.

“He was a great friend...he had absolute, total, thorough integrity,” Vice President Joe Biden tweeted Monday night.

Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon called Skelton “a role model to whom I had the honor of presenting Missouri’s highest military honor, the Conspicuous Service Medal. Ike Skelton inspired us all with his quiet dignity and tireless commitment to America’s men and women in uniform.

“A friend to Missourians, Americans and liberty-loving people worldwide, Congressman Skelton embodied the true meaning of public service and will forever be remembered as a leader who left a legacy of greater prosperity and security for his district, our state and our nation,” Nixon said.

House Democratic Whip Steny H. Hoyer of Maryland called Skelton “an extraordinary American”
“And I had the privilege of serving alongside him in Congress for nearly 30 years where I saw his compassion, his humility, and his deep-rooted Missouri values up close,” Hoyer said. “Ike was an incredible soul, a caring man who loved service and championed all who gave of themselves for their country and communities.”

Missouri Sen. Roy Blunt, a Republican, also praised Skelton.

“No member of the Congress was more dedicated to America’s defense and those who defend us than Ike Skelton,” Blunt said. “He loved our country and its history and will be remembered for his contributions to both.”

Said Missouri Democratic Party chairman Roy Temple: “He was a Missourian, a statesman and a champion of a strong and sensible national defense. And above all, he was a gentleman. His love of and faith in America was unshakable and his support for the U.S. military was second to none. This is a loss for Missouri and the nation.”

Lexington was Skelton’s hometown. He was first elected prosecutor in Lafayette County and served in the Missouri Senate before going to Washington in 1976, the year Jimmy Carter took the White House.

Skelton represented Missouri’s 4th Congressional District in the western and central part of the state. He easily kept his seat for 17 election cycles in a district and state that increasingly trended Republican.

Skelton was a pro-gun, anti-abortion Democrat who voted against the Affordable Care Act.

He was defeated in 2010 by Republican state lawmaker Vicky Hartzler, who had strong tea party backing.

“Ike exuded civility,” said Richard Martin, a long-time Democratic consultant. “He had great friends on both sides of the aisle. All the Democrats I ever met looked up to him despite their differences they often had with him on issues, and Republicans as well.

“He was a statesman -- not a highly charismatic guy. He didn’t aspire to run for higher office. Once he was elected to the Congress and assigned to the Armed Services Committee, I think he knew that was his calling, and he was going to make the most of it.”

Skelton served as chairman of the House Armed Services Committee from 2007 to 2011. Skelton also served on the Small Business Committee as subcommittee chairman for Procurement, International Trade and Technology.
He once described his role as the Armed Services chairman with a single word, repeated over and over: “Oversight, oversight, oversight.”

As Whiteman Air Force Base near Knob Noster was losing its cache of long-range nuclear missiles, Skelton secured its future in the late 1980s by getting the Defense Department to place the new B-2 bomber there.

After redistricting made Skelton the representative for Missouri’s Fort Leonard Wood in 1983, he helped locate the Army Engineer, Chemical and Military Police Schools at the base. The number of troops undergoing training there more than quadrupled and the post’s mission expanded from the Army to all branches of military service.

“I live and breathe what I do,” Skelton told The Kansas City Star in 2010. “I enjoy every minute of it...I know I’ve made a difference.”

In the 1980s, Skelton played a key role in passing the Goldwater-Nichols Act, which created the joint commands. He worked to improve housing and facilities for service members and their families. He was critical of both the first Bush administration and President Clinton’s policies of cutting military spending too much.

Skelton was deeply skeptical of the Bush administration’s decision to go to war with Iraq. His chief concern was that an ongoing occupation would be difficult. But he still voted for the war resolution when Bush sent it to Congress.

“I have no doubt that our military would decisively defeat Iraq’s forces and remove Saddam (Hussein),” Skelton said then. “But like the proverbial dog chasing the car down the road, we must consider what we would do after we caught it.”

Isaac Newton Skelton IV was born Dec. 20, 1931. His father met future President Harry Truman in 1928 when the elder Skelton was the Lafayette County prosecutor and Truman was a Jackson County judge, and they remained friends for life, The Almanac of American Politics reported.

At 17, the younger Skelton attended Truman’s 1949 inauguration following his upset defeat of Thomas Dewey.

Skelton dreamed of going to West Point but he got polio as a teenager, which made his left arm useless and made him ineligible for military service. He remembered walking down the street in Lexington in 1944 watching C-47s fly overhead pulling gliders, training pilots for D-Day.

**Skelton graduated from the University of Missouri and its law school and returned home to Lexington to practice law.** At 25, he became county prosecutor.
Five years later, in 1962, Truman urged him to run for Congress, but Skelton opted to continue practicing law with his father.

Skelton entered politics in 1970 when he was elected to the state Senate. Six years later, he ran for Congress where he caught a break. In the Democratic primary, two candidates from Jackson County split 45 percent of the vote, allowing Skelton to emerge as the winner with 40 percent. In the general election, he defeated the mayor of Independence, Richard King, with 56 percent of the vote.


After losing his seat in Congress, Skelton joined the law firm of Husch Blackwell of Kansas City as a partner, advising the firm in Kansas City and in its Washington D.C. office. He maintained homes in Lexington and in McLean, Va.

Skelton was most recently elected chairman of the National World War I Centennial Commission.

Orban, who served 16 years on Skelton’s congressional staff and recently joined him practicing law in Husch Blackwell’s Washington office, said the former lawmaker had been especially pleased by presidential appointments to that commission and to the American Battle Monuments Commission, which is in charge of U.S. military resting places overseas.

In 2012 he received the Harry S. Truman Good Neighbor Award.

Skelton had been scheduled to appear at a Veterans Day tribute the afternoon of Nov. 11 at the Truman Library in Independence, as part of a program that bore his name. He was to participate in a wreath-laying ceremony with retired Gen. George W. Casey Jr.

Read more here: http://www.kansascity.com/2013/10/29/4583781/longtime-missouri-congressman.html#storylink=cpy
The biggest obstacle for House and Senate conferees is the wide gap in food stamp cuts — the House bill cuts by $39 billion; the Senate by $4.5 billion

WASHINGTON - House and Senate lawmakers responsible for writing a farm bill will gather publicly on Wednesday for the first time, a meeting expected to shed light on how quickly the conferees could strike a deal on the much-delayed legislation.

The 41 lawmakers are charged with merging farm bills passed this summer by the House and Senate into one piece of legislation, an arduous task highlighted by the $35 billion gap between the two sides on food stamp spending and the apparent reluctance of each side to budge from its position.

Top officials and staff from the Senate and House Agriculture committees already have met privately to work on a new five-year farm bill, which includes crop insurance, subsidies, conservation, public nutrition and food aid programs. The Wednesday conference, where lawmakers will make opening statements, could be the only gathering for the farm bill not held behind closed doors. By law, at least one meeting must be open to the public.

"People are going to be watching to see how the opening speeches go on Wednesday as to what kind of tone is set as to whether people are highlighting the differences or highlighting the places of commonality," said Pat Westhoff, director of the Food and Agricultural Policy Research Institute, a think tank at the University of Missouri. "That may be some indicator of just how eager everybody is to get to an agreement."
The five-year, $500 billion farm bills being proposed by each chamber have a handful of differences on agriculture policy issues that need to be ironed out, but those who follow the process do not expect those to be a major hang-up that would impede passage of the legislation.

The provisions expected to be the most contentious focus on crop insurance. Unlike the House bill, the Senate bill mandates farmers who get crop insurance to meet certain environmental requirements. The Senate also would require farmers with adjusted gross income greater than $750,000 a year to pay more for federally subsidized insurance. Both bills would end direct payments, doled out regardless of need, and increase the number of crop insurance programs available to farmers.

Congress has struggled to craft a farm bill to replace the 2008 measure, which expired Sept. 30, 2012. Lawmakers extended the legislation earlier this year through the end of September in hopes the delay would provide them more time to reach a deal. While some farm programs have expired for a second time, the more pressing deadline comes on Jan. 1, when a 1949 farm law requires that subsidy prices begin to increase, starting with dairy payments.

"I think everybody realizes that the alarm goes off at the end of the year and something has to happen" before then, said Rep. Kristi Noem, R-S.D., a member of the farm bill conference committee. "I think the vast majority of it can be agreed to pretty quickly. The nutrition may be the sticking point."

In June, the Democratic-controlled Senate approved a reduction in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, better known as food stamps, of $4.5 billion over a decade. The Republican-led House recently passed a reduction of $39 billion. Republicans have pushed for deeper cuts to restore the program's original eligibility limits and preserve the safety net for the truly needy, while Democrats have said the reductions go too far and argue that the changes would force millions of deserving Americans off of food stamps.

Lawmakers also have to agree on timing. While the Senate bill has proposed extending both farm policy and food stamps for five years, the House would do farm policy for the same time but only three years for nutrition. Agriculture groups fear that severing the two parts would lessen the urgency to pass a farm bill by siphoning off support from urban lawmakers.

Chad Hart, an associate professor of economics at Iowa State University, said the nutrition debate is likely going to force Congress to extend the farm bill for a second time in order to give lawmakers more time to negotiate. "I think the conferees might be able to reach a
compromise, but I don't know if it can get a majority of votes in both houses," said Hart. "The farm bill is usually not this political."

Several factors are in play that could spur passage of the farm bill, but approval is far from certain.

President Barack Obama has tabbed farm legislation as one of his top priorities, and Senate Democrats have been adamant about not temporarily extending the farm bill again. The threat of the 1949 law going into effect also looms on the horizon. And the fact that the conference is happening at all is seen as promising, according to those who follow the farm bill.

Craig Hill, president of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, said he will be keeping a close watch on the farm bill conference meeting to look for signals from the lawmakers "so we know where to apply pressure and influence."

"Another extension is unacceptable," Hill added. "We need to get this done."

Students reaping lessons and rewards from school gardens

By Catherine Martin

Tuesday, October 29, 2013 at 2:00 pm

On a brisk afternoon last week, fifth-graders at Grant Elementary School filed out of their classroom into the school's courtyard, where they crouched down near four raised garden beds filled with broccoli plants.

The children measured the plants and recorded the data in their notebooks. They were looking to see whether gardens grow better with or without a fence. One bed was partially fenced, another was surrounded by a fence and two had no fence at all.

Broccoli plants have proved to be a successful hands-on science experiment for John Nies' fifth-grade class. But more than that, the experiment is part of a growing district trend of adding working gardens at schools to provide fresh produce to the students.

"When kids grow it themselves, they're more apt to eat it," said Laina Fullum, director of nutrition services for Columbia Public Schools.

The raised vegetable beds are fairly new at Grant, so the youngsters haven't had a chance to eat a lot of the produce yet. But they will eat the broccoli after harvest. The plants will be moved into a greenhouse at the school as temperatures drop.

Beeler Lile, 10, said she is looking forward to eating the broccoli. She really likes broccoli, especially when dipped in ranch dressing or steamed with cheese. Beeler said she had already tasted some Grant produce during summer school, when she was treated to ice cream made from strawberries grown in the courtyard.

"It was really good. It was fresh and homemade with chunks of strawberries in it," she said. "I don't like strawberry ice cream, but I liked that."

Produce from the garden is served as a special treat to kids to celebrate their hard work, Nies said. Eventually, he hopes the beds will provide enough food to share with the whole school.
Nies said he sees several perks of having a garden at school. Gardens bring children outside and teach them responsibility. Growing plants can also support both the math and science curricula, he said. Children are often more motivated to learn when they are relating lessons to their environment.

"And they get the benefit of growing food and getting to eat it," he said.

Many other elementary schools are experiencing similar success. Lee Elementary has kept a garden for several years, and kindergarteners recently harvested carrots they planted in summer school. Second-graders tend plots of tomatoes, and third-graders compost, Principal Karen Burger said.

Rock Bridge Elementary has a large garden where students planted and harvested sweet potatoes and pumpkins. Students at Benton Elementary also harvested pumpkins. Over at West Boulevard Elementary, children make salsa with their produce. At Russell Boulevard Elementary, children sample soup made from vegetables grown at the school garden.

Flavor is important when serving vegetables to kids, Fullum said, and fresh produce is typically more flavorful.

"Anytime you're trying to get kids to eat produce, you want it to taste as good as possible," she said.

Chuck Bay agreed. Bay, the owner of Wilson's Garden Center, partnered with the school district this year to provide fresh, local produce.

"It helps them decide if they like produce. It's generally more flavorful the fresher it is, and when they taste something that is fresh, then maybe they decide they like vegetables," he said. "If it's always kind of the canned stuff or things that aren't as fresh or flavorful, they may form the opinion that they don't care for vegetables or fruit."

Bay said he provides schools with a variety of produce, including tomatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, broccoli, apples and squash.

**The partnership with Wilson's is new this year, but the district has formed many food alliances over the years, teaming up with Slow Food Katy Trail, the Community Garden Coalition and University of Missouri Extension.** Gardens at schools aren't a new concept, either. Fullum said they have come and gone at various schools over the years.

Oftentimes, gardens get their start because teachers who enjoy gardening are willing to lead school projects, Fullum said. The problem with that, however, is if that when the garden-organizing teacher leaves the school, the garden project wilts.

At Blue Ridge Elementary, Home-School Communicator Jay Wiltshire said he first noticed a previous effort at the school when he saw a sign out back identifying an outdoor classroom. He
also discovered a trail in the woods behind the school. Wiltshire decided to try to revitalize those efforts and add more outdoor experiences for children.

Aside from the outdoor classroom and trail, Wiltshire worked with others at the school to add vegetable gardens at the end of the last school year. Students grew radishes and sweet potatoes, which they recently harvested. A crab apple tree near the gardens was also grafted and will produce five varieties of apples by next fall, Wiltshire said. The students also planted garlic to grow over the winter.

While Wiltshire was the driving force behind getting the gardens started, he has seen a lot of participation from other people, including parents.

April Dunnington is among the parents who lend a helping hand. She spends a lot of time at Blue Ridge working on the garden and other projects. Dunnington said she is really excited about the growing projects. She thinks the garden is a good opportunity for the children to learn and is pleased that garden projects are feeding the students' imaginations.

The garden has also increased parental involvement at Blue Ridge, she said.

"The best thing is how inclusive it is," she said. "There's a community network."

The school staff is invested, too. Over the summer, Wiltshire said staffers would sometimes come by the garden to make sure it was getting water. Staff members and parents are taking an interest in a courtyard planting project, adding things such as planters on wheels to grow more vegetables.

A couple of weeks ago, Wiltshire looked out over the courtyard and said, "Every time I come in here I see something new. It's exciting for me to come here and see something happening without me."

Similarly, at Grant, Principal Jennifer Wingert said she thinks the project will carry on even if Nies leaves the school.

"I think there's enough awareness in our culture as a school. We're all interested in this kind of thing," she said. "He's done so much work, it would almost be a disservice to him not to see it" continue.

District efforts to make sure students are getting their fill of fresh produce seem likely to continue in the foreseeable future, too.

"I think it's still a community interest, big time," Fullum said.
A Spiced Life Food in the land of plenty

By Nina Furstenau

Tuesday, October 29, 2013 at 2:00 pm

I was having a perfectly pleasant conversation with myself over this column—yogurt smoothies or squash this week?—when I caved. I went to the World Food Prize a week ago with students in a global food insecurity class in the Science and Agricultural Journalism program at the University of Missouri. And the issues there press. The meeting in Des Moines drew scientists, government folk and journalists from all over the world by plane and car to the agrarian United States.

We've all seen the bounty we can produce. Fields of plenty undulated outside the van windows for most of the six-hour drive north. Yet hunger and its treacherous cousin, malnutrition, are on every continent. And the worry is we might not be doing enough now to meet the expectations of 9.6 billion people by the year 2050.

After Norman Borlaug — an Iowan credited with the Green Revolution and saving countless lives with his advances in agriculture — received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970, we collectively took a long breath. But we really shouldn't have done that. The world's food supply needs tending. Governments took precious resources away from agricultural development and farm-to-market infrastructure needs. To counter this and encourage and recognize agricultural advances, the World Food Prize is awarded every year during the Borlaug Dialogue.

"Over the past decade, countries are maintaining growth in productivity on global average," Margaret Zeigler, executive director of Global Harvest Initiative, said. "But those findings should not downplay the serious and urgent fact that we must maintain an increasing rate of global agricultural productivity year after year for the next 40 years."

Despite overall growth in productivity worldwide, strains on our food system include a happily increasing middle class who want more access to protein and other agricultural products. The middle class in China, for instance, is projected to grow from 270 million to 950 million people by 2030. Then, too, production of food in developing nations, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, continues to lag behind.

Access to food might be as important as productivity of farms, though. A large part of food shortages today come down to logistics. Food spoils because of poor storage options, is wasted,
never makes it to market because of terrible road conditions, poor ag extension and failed farm policy.

None of this is apparent in my kitchen as I stir my homemade chicken soup for dinner tonight. But I mull the central question of our time, as stated by my co-professor Bill Allen: "Why is it that we humans grow plenty of food to feed everyone on the planet yet millions starve to death each year? Still others live desperate, debilitating lives of malnutrition. Even in our own country, the United States, countless children go to bed hungry. How can this be?"

Next column, I promise, we'll talk yogurt or squash, I'll have a discussion with myself and decide which. But for now, in this land of plenty for many of us, give a little thought and support to not only the Food Bank's good work but to issues of food policy and how best to maintain a livelihood for farmers around the globe so they can feed themselves and all of us.

For more coverage on the World Food Prize, see the blog series by MU journalism students at http://muearth.wordpress.com

Nina Furstenau teaches food writing in the Science and Agricultural Journalism program at the University of Missouri. She is the author of "Savor Missouri, River Hill Country Food and Wine" and "Biting Through the Skin: An Indian Kitchen in America's Heartland."
“You won’t see a budget come from Obama and the Democrats. That’s been their plan this whole term, and it’s going to continue until he’s ousted one way or the other. They don’t want to put an actual budget out there that would actually have to proclaim where they want to spend our dollars. That would show what their policy is really all about. They want to keep that hidden, so what they do is they continue with these continuing resolutions, and when the Republicans cry foul a little bit, then the media goes, ‘Oh, my God, the Republicans want to lose the government.’ ”

Robertson replies: That’s just not true. President Obama released a well-publicized budget blueprint in April, and both parties submitted budget plans earlier this year. That’s according to the well-known liberal party organ Wall Street Journal of Oct. 20. The main difference in the plans, the Journal reported, are over taxes and spending: The Senate Democratic proposal would raise close to $1 trillion in tax revenue over 10 years, and the GOP plan includes deep spending cuts.

“I read with interest the letter from the downtown business owner saying he was thrilled to get Roots N Blues out of the downtown area. He said it was a mess and snarled up the traffic and was glad to see it go to Stephens Park. As a resident who lives close to Stephens Lake Park, I would be thrilled to have it out of our area, too. It did nothing but snarl traffic and leave a big mess. What about moving it to the fairground? It would have the facilities for parking and stuff like that. Wouldn’t that be an option?”

“What the hell is going on at the University of Missouri? Three reported sexual assaults on women in the last three weeks? Two in the last month in MU residence halls? As the mother of three daughters planning to enter college, I am outraged. How can this happen, and where is the MU outrage?”

“I’m calling in reference to the article ‘City seeks input on park improvements.’ Parks and Recreation Director Mike Griggs said staff would present attendees with two draft improvement plans, including one that would remove the parking lot from the park and convert it to green space to encourage park users to use non-motorized transportation to get there and that
automobile parking would still be available on nearby streets. What are they thinking? Those nearby streets are residential streets.”

“I have a one-word-only comment on Hank’s editorial tribute to our injured warrior quarterback, James Franklin. Put it in caps, please: AMEN.”