

Hancock schools consider growing their own food

March 19, 2013

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HANCOCK - Schools need food for their cafeterias, and one teacher at Hancock Public Schools has a plan to get the freshest produce possible by growing it on school property.

At the regular meeting Monday of the Board of Education, Hancock Central High School science teacher Brian Rajdl gave a presentation of a plan to grow vegetables in gardens and hoop greenhouses, initially on the grounds of Gordon G. Barkell Elementary School.

Rajdl said if carried out as he envisions it, the plan will involve students, faculty and staff, and members of the community, including farmers and growers.

"It seems like people are interested," he said. "We have enough room (on district property) to grow all the food for the school."

Rajdl said there may be enough extra produce from the gardens and greenhouses to sell to Portage Health, where Nutrition Services Director Mark Pittillo already expressed an interest to be part of the effort.

The 40-foot-by-120-foot mobile hoop greenhouses can be used to grow vegetables even in winter, Rajdl said.

"Our first goal is a salad bar every day," he said.

Rajdl said it's possible \$12,000 to \$20,000 in revenue per greenhouse could be raised by selling produce to the public.

Other ideas he has for growing vegetables include raised bed gardens and root storage containers.

The district recently began serving fresh vegetables and fruits in its cafeterias, and Rajdl said it has been a problem to get the older students to eat better.

"If you just put it on the line, they won't eat it," he said.

However, if the students are involved with the production of the produce, Rajdl said they will be more likely to eat it.

Rajdl said for the future he envisions working with local farmers, who could raise animals for the district, and possibly growing orchards on school property.

"Can we have a fully operating farm here?" he asked.

So far, Rajdl said 39 district teachers have expressed an interest in integrating the work with the food production and classroom work.

Rajdl said he either has some grants for the project or is in the process of applying for grants. He's working on writing an application for a \$100,000 grant to get the program going.

Rajdl said he's excited by the level of interest by students, faculty and staff, and members of the community so far for the plan to grow food for the district. "The ball is rolling," he said.

Rajdl's presentation was for board members' information only. No action was taken.