



CASE STUDY

# St-Romuald School's hydroponic gardening project: Cultivating commitment and motivation to learn





## St-Romuald School profile

Located in the rural community of Farnham, Quebec (Canada), this elementary school is home to 350 students, many of whom come from underprivileged backgrounds. To provide a context for healthy learning and development, St-Romuald School promotes respect for self, others and the environment. Similarly, the Town of Farnham places the environment at the forefront of its priorities with a community garden and a farm that produces pesticide-free fruits and vegetables for the community.

### A little history: Choosing hydroponic gardens

**Environmental responsibility is deeply rooted in the practices of the Town of Farnham and St-Romuald Elementary School.** For years, administrators and teachers have used the natural environment, including gardens, to enhance student learning and development.

Prior to adopting the Vireo hydroponic gardening project, the school had been recognized for its outdoor gardening projects. **Sonia Demers, 6th grade teacher and project leader, remembers her students' enthusiasm for gardening activities,** which encouraged her to look for new ways to increase motivation and participation in her class. **That's how she discovered Vireo's turnkey hydroponic gardening project, which provides hands-on learning opportunities throughout the year.**

**Julie Guillemette, the school's principal, was quickly convinced of the project's benefits:** "We need to focus on the environment, and I believe hydroponic gardens are an important part of the solution". **Julie also saw the gardens as a way to strengthen ties with families:** "Many of our parents may not have had a positive relationship with school when they were young. I think building relationships with parents really helps our school and our students in the long run".

**Sonia secured financial support from several organizations, including the town of Farnham itself. As a result, the school was able to purchase not one, but two hydroponic gardens!** For Patrick Melchior, Mayor of Farnham, the alignment with the local community's goals was clear: "Learning to care for the environment is not an option, it's an obligation. I was very happy to support this project".



"The gardens have completely changed the climate of our very old school, making it more lively for everyone!"

Sonia Demers, Teacher



## Integrating the Vireo project

Sonia was excited but nervous to receive the gardens at school: "**When I started the project, I knew nothing about hydroponics, but I thought I could learn. It was so easy!** Vireo sent us a link with the instructions we needed. They were structured, clear and the hydroponic garden was easy to set up." She also highlights the support she received along the way: "**Our Vireo coordinator was there for us when we needed help**".

Once the gardens were installed, Sonia's students became masters of the project: "I believe in project-based learning. Our class of 28 students was divided into committees that took on different roles. I completed between 25 and 30 different projects with my students."

**For Sonia, it was exciting to learn alongside her 6th graders and put the spirit of project-based learning into practice.** She placed the gardens in front of the school library for all students and staff to enjoy. Julie, the principal, points out: "All the students could see the hydroponic gardens in the school, and they were looking forward to the time when it would be their turn to grow their own vegetables".



**The Vireo gardens and digital platform are probably the best project-based learning resources you can get.**

**My students were engaged, motivated, having fun doing math, science, reading, writing, collaborating, cooperating - they were managing the activities around the gardens.**



## Students and a community that shine

Julie is very pleased with the response from students, teachers, parents, and the school as a whole: "We live in an agricultural area, but you wouldn't know it by looking at our kids. They are consumed by instant and fast technology. **This project has encouraged them to slow down and take their time, just like Mother Nature does**". Her words echo one of St-Romuald's core values: "We believe that all students can learn and develop to their full potential if we give them the tools and time to do so."



Julie saw a connection between the way plants grow and the way students grow: "Helping plants grow is not a race, nor does it have a deadline. Plants grow at their own pace, and by reconnecting with nature, so do our students."

The 6th graders who tended the gardens daily felt the greatest impact: "The students value themselves—they felt competent because we gave them a lot of responsibility," said Julie. **"I've seen students who are not the highest achievers jump out of their seats to help with the gardens. They were happy to have that responsibility."**



"Students have grown in ways that are not typical, and that's powerful. Teachers have used the gardens to think outside the box in math, writing, and science."

We've given the students a different way to learn and the teachers a different way to teach because this project makes learning tangible. I truly believe that as adults, our children will remember these gardens as the project that really impacted them.

Julie Guillemette, Principal and former teacher

Julie also notes the project's positive impact on other teachers: **"Sonia and her gardens have inspired the whole school"**. She admits that at the beginning of the project, "one of my concerns as an administrator was if we lost our lead teacher, would we be able to continue this project? **Today, I can honestly say that any teacher or staff member would be willing to get involved. All of our teachers have seen the impact of this project with their own eyes.**"

"I've seen the students taking care of the garden, being responsible, and I can see that the parents see it as an accessible project. They've thought about the well-being and health of their children. That's great. The garden project has brought people together.

Patrick Melchior, Mayor of the Town of Farnham



## Beyond the grades: The future hopes of hydroponic gardens

"It takes a village to raise a child" is an adage that is part of the mission of Saint-Romuald Elementary School, and to that end, many of its goals for the future are to strengthen ties with families and the local community.

Julie hopes to expand the project to include more students: "I hope that in the future the gardens will be integrated into teaching and learning in more classes."

**Sonia had no shortage of ideas for the next steps in the Vireo project:** "I'd like to create a salad bar and invite other partners to offer healthy snacks made from local ingredients to our students."

**If the passion and energy seen at St-Romuald is any indication, it's that when school communities come together to connect with nature, they can create exciting, real-world learning experiences for students.** The hydroponic garden project generated excitement and motivation among the students, teachers, and principal at St-Romuald, who saw and felt the benefits of using hydroponic gardens as a method of learning and growing throughout the year.





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