“Someone in my family suffers from Type 2 Diabetes.” After I read this statement out loud to my class of high school students, all but two of them crossed the room to stand by the sign that read, “Agree.” For a few moments, I paused there in silence. I was not expecting such a drastic response to this issue in this little classroom. I watched as students joined me in silence, looking around at each other, at the floor, or thoughtfully in the distance.

This was the third class of our Food Justice and Service Learning program at Santa Fe High School. During this particular activity, I had been reading various statements, some of them seemingly unrelated. Students would move to a corner of the room that represented the extent to which they agree or disagree with statements like “I can’t pronounce all of the ingredients in my soda or snack.” to “It’s my responsibility to pursue a more just world.” What could these statements possibly have to do with each other? And why are we talking about this in a botany class? Isn’t botany about plants?

Ms. Middleton, a high school botany teacher at Santa Fe High School, is passionate about growing plants, but finds her students are less so. When we sat down together to discuss the possibility of a pilot program in her class, she exuded an enthusiasm I rarely encountered in the public school system. Many teachers are so heavily burdened with standards and testing that a Food Justice and Service Learning curriculum is a far and away dream, something that would probably be wonderful, but certainly not a priority.

Sitting with Ms. Middleton over coffee, I hear the disappointment in her voice as she explains the waning interest in Botany classes among the student population. Though a school garden had been put in place, it has proven to be a struggle every year to garner enough interest and support to keep it thriving. She was looking for a fresh perspective for her class, a way to approach growing plants that might speak to the interests of more students.

With the green light to start this program, I established a partnership with Tashina, an
AmeriCorps volunteer and high school educator from a non-profit organization called Earth Care in Santa Fe. We worked together to gather various curriculum and to design a condensed set of lessons and activities that spoke to our shared passion for growing food, healing the planet, and our vision for a socially just world. It also helped to have someone who understood my undying love for green smoothies, and was willing to bring in a few extra blenders to convince our students to give them a taste!

Focusing on the three P’s of the Food system – people, planet, and profit- gave us a structure to talk about nearly any topic that came up with our students. Botany wasn’t just about the science of growing plants anymore, but included lively discussions about how GMO’s affected the health of our planet while creating mass profits for a few big companies, how farm worker can hardly make a living wage while being exposed to dangerous pesticides that ruin their health, and how school gardens can help us eat better while learning academic subjects like math and science. The conversations took on a life of their own, and watched as we merely facilitated the unfolding of these new, poignant discoveries.

Having served two previous terms as an AmeriCorps volunteer myself, I knew the transformative power of service as a means to understand complex issues and to address them in a way that empowers and enables real change, however small. It is not enough to merely talk about these broken systems. In fact, it can be incredibly overwhelming and paralyzing to focus on the massiveness of the issues we collectively face. What better way to integrate the energy of our classroom discussions than with a plan of action to serve our own school community?

We assessed the needs of the school and surrounding community, as well as our resources and timeline. Proposed projects ranged from a school wide composting system to bringing in more local produce for a salad bar. Eventually, with all things considered, students decided that the best use of their time and energy was obvious. The neglected school garden outside their classroom window was a relatively easy and realistic way to make a major impact on their school food community. So why not make it fun too?

Students decided to break into teams, claiming a bed the garden to revitalize with a theme of some kind. One group knew how important pollinators are to the health of a garden, and decided to research and plant native pollinator species to attract friends of the insect variety. Another group, with a flair for the culinary, planted all the necessary ingredients for their favorite salsa recipe. Building new raised beds with chicken wire bottoms will help prevent more damage from the ever-present problem of prairie dogs and rabbits. A living wall of fruit trees will shade and beautify the shared space. Giving students the chance to own this service project put the power to change the food system in their hands, one shovel full of dirt at a time.

**Annie’s + FoodCorps:**

*FoodCorps is a nationwide team of passionate leaders who work to connect kids to real food. As a “Seed Funder,” Annie’s is enabling FoodCorps Fellows to support, guide, and mentor service members who then go out to teach kids about what healthy food is and where it comes from, build and tend school gardens, and bring high-quality local food into public school cafeterias.*