West Iron County second graders get green thumb technology tips from Caryn Johnson, executive assistant at NorthStar Health Systems, with some coaching encouragement from Denise Maloney, WIC Wellness coordinator, as the students got ready to plant a school garden at the hospital. NHS will be tending garden duties during the summer until fall, when the students will return to reap their harvest. It's all part of the WIC's commitment with NHS to develop healthy lifestyle goals for students.

IRON RIVER—West Iron County's second graders took time off from the classroom to learn a few lessons on gardening as the school year came to a close.

On May 23, the students began the spring planting process of their school garden, assisted by WIC and NorthStar Health System staff and volunteers, with a variety of vegetables in hopes of a "bountiful fall harvest," noted Denise Maloney, WIC Wellness coordinator.

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"The hospital will attend to the garden over the summer months," said Maloney. "When school begins again next fall, these same children, who will then be third graders, will go back to the hospital to harvest the garden."

At that time, said Maloney, will be assisted by the NHS kitchen staff in using these fresh vegetables to prepare a meal to enjoy for a harvest celebration.

"West Iron County Public Schools chose to bring the second graders because the life cycle of a plant is one of the Michigan state benchmarks in the second grade science curriculum," said Maloney.

"We felt that is a wonderful opportunity for these children to have a 'hands-on' learning experience to watch the process of a seed growing into the end product. Children learn best when they are actively engaged in their curriculum."

According to Maloney, this experience again helps to reinforce the "farm to table" concept. Earlier in May, the school's third graders visited State Rep. Ed McBroom's dairy farm in Vulcan, where they had the opportunity to experience life on a dairy farm.

"Many children today do not know where their food comes from," said Maloney. "These are all great opportunities to expose our students to this."

While the primary goal of schools is academic, she noted, equally important is developing healthy lifestyle goals and habits in the students that will carry them through a lifetime.

"West Iron County Public Schools is passionate about creating a healthier generation. We have incorporated a new health curriculum and physical education component.

"We have begun a walking club where students have already walked thousands of miles. Our students and staff participated in our school's first ever 5K earlier in the week. We have brought in registered dieticians and a sports nutritionist from Bellin Hospital in Green Bay to work with

our students."

The school staff has also participated in an employee wellness program as well, said Maloney.

"We all wore pedometers at school to count our steps and charted our eating and exercise habits. Research and data tell us that children learn best when they are physically healthy and active," said Maloney.

"We are very grateful for our community partner, NorthStar Health System, in partnering with us on this project. West Iron County Public Schools and NorthStar Health System share a common goal of growing healthy children, healthy families and, ultimately, a healthy community."