

Cafeteria Classroom Creates Space and Tools to Foster Healthy Habits

Capital City Public Charter School, Middle School – Washington, DC

WHY CREATE A COOKING CLASSROOM?

Capital City Public Charter School's Middle School uses a project-based educational framework; when the school sat down to design a program to address wellness, it was essential to provide students and staff with hands-on opportunities to not only learn the value of health and wellness but also develop lifelong healthy habits. With help from a Kaiser Permanente Thriving Schools Action Plan Grant, Capital City was able to make a critical component of the school's wellness efforts a reality: they created a Culinary Center. A designated classroom space in the cafeteria, the Culinary Center enables students and staff to learn to prepare healthy meals, gaining experience through cooking demonstrations and lessons. Although the school had existing courses and after-school clubs addressing healthy eating, instructors did not previously have a regular space to use or the appropriate kitchen appliances to prepare meals.

DEMOGRAPHICS

- 5th to 8th grade
- 326 students
- 76% of students qualify for free or reduced price meals

ETHNICITY

- 46% Latino
- 38% Black/African-American
- 7% White/Caucasian
- 5% Multiracial
- 4% Asian

ACTION STEPS

During the summer of 2014, new kitchen appliances – hot plates, food processors and mixers – were purchased and installed in the cafeteria to create the Culinary Center. The school's food service manager was tasked with the role of managing the center, and early in the school year, organized a series of trainings for teachers, staff, and students to familiarize them with the new cooking equipment. Teacher trainings included tips for integrating the Culinary Center into lesson plans. The center has been integrated into school activities in a number of ways. Two healthy eating elective classes (Top Chef and Garden-to-Table) engaged students in preparing meals during interactive, one-hour weekly lessons at the center. Weekly after-school cooking classes were held at the center and led by the school's food service manager, who is a certified raw food chef. In addition to students, staff learned new cooking ideas, including a healthy pancake-making lesson and a cook-off during a professional development training. The Culinary Center enhanced the school's gardening experience, allowing students and staff to integrate fresh, seasonal produce harvested on campus into the recipes prepared in the center.

CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

When the Culinary Center first opened, instructors had a tough time introducing students to new foods. Some students were not familiar with produce from the school garden or how to use certain ingredients

during lessons and cooking demos. To overcome this, instructors structured lessons to gradually introduce students to new or unfamiliar foods, encouraging them to taste small bites. With time and hands-on opportunities to participate in food preparation and cooking, students became increasingly excited to try new recipes and ingredients.

IMPACTS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The response to the new Culinary Center has been enthusiastic and positive, energizing the school around healthy cooking. Student interest has been particularly strong – cooking electives are at full capacity, and the after-school cooking club has one of the longest waiting lists in the school. The success of the Culinary Center’s initial year has paved the way for new programs to broaden the Center’s reach. The school is planning to train students to be model chefs for their peers, and a new cooking club will be offered to 2nd through 4th grade students attending Capital City Public Charter School’s Lower School. Students have also brought their healthy cooking home; many have reported trying recipes and taste tests with their families.

“Students, through the healthy cooking electives and after-school cooking clubs, are becoming advocates for healthy eating in their school community and at home.”

-School Wellness Staff

ADVICE FOR OTHER SCHOOLS

Gaining early support from administrators, teachers and other staff was critical to the project’s success. One staff member noted, “Administrators were supportive of [the] after-school cooking club and even encouraged non-teaching staff to lead the club, which allowed staff to share their knowledge and hobbies...” Investing time and energy into pre-planning was also important. Instructors suggest carefully planning sessions in advance to introduce students to new foods in a structured way, starting out with familiar foods and then branching out to new recipes and ingredients.

For More Information:

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The Thriving Schools Action Plan Grant Program is funded by Kaiser Permanente and implemented in partnership with the Alliance for a Healthier Generation’s Healthy Schools Program. Action Plan Grants support schools to create healthy school environments for students and staff. This case study was developed based on the school’s responses to the Action Plan Grants year-end survey.

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