

It's schoolwork they get to eat

Program offers students lively lessons in cooking and making healthful choices

BY ROB KASPER
[SUN REPORTER]

One afternoon, a group of middle-schoolers at the Stadium School in Waverly huddled around plates of steaming vegetables. These were servings of North African stew with harissa sauce, not the usual preteen fare.

Yet the students, eight girls and five boys, took generous portions of the mixture of chickpeas, carrots, tomatoes, beans, sweet potatoes, green peppers, onions, cinnamon, cumin and paprika. They were eating the results of their classwork. They had spent the last 40 minutes or so chopping vegetables, cooking and doing a little dancing.

Across town at the Hampstead Hill Academy, next to Patterson Park, a similar hookup between youths and healthful foods occurred some weeks later. Sev-

enth-graders classified plates of fruit and vegetables by their vitamin content, then proceeded to enjoy an in-class vitamin B moment — a snack of almonds resting on brussels sprouts leaves. Vitamin B, the students were told, could help soothe their nerves. Whether out of nervousness or hunger, they devoured the leaves and nuts.

These scenes were from a class called Food for Life, a teaching approach that contends students will warm up to healthful foods if they get a chance to cook and eat them in a lively, hands-on classroom setting.

Started last year as a demonstration project funded by a grant from the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation and fueled by donations from Whole Foods and other area merchants, it is being taught in two Baltimore City schools and was taught at an after-school program last summer at the Franciscan Center.

Its creator, Antonia Demas, said she hopes one day to have the program available to all city schools.

Perhaps the most succinct appraisal of the program came from Alex Barry, a sixth-grader at the Stadium School. Now a graduate of last fall's Food for Life class, the 11-year-old credited it with broadening his culinary outlook. Or as he put it, "I never use to eat greens or beans because I thought they were nasty. Now I like them."

Demas, who has a graduate degree in nutrition from Cornell University, is director of the Food Studies Institute in Trumansburg, N.Y. The institute, she [Please see KIDS, 5F]

Stadium School fifth-grader Andre Warsaw, 10, smells Three Sisters Casserole, the Native American dish he and fellow students prepared.

AMY DAVIS [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]



In Food for Life, students get to eat their schoolwork

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said, has trained some 350 teachers nationwide in nutrition education. Among them are her daughter, Ariel Demas, who teaches the Food for Life classes at Hampstead Hill, and Luke Seipp-Williams, who leads classes at the Stadium School and last summer taught at the Franciscan Center.

Rather than taking a scolding, eat-your-spinach approach, this program emphasizes the pleasures of cooking and eating, the elder Demas said. In each of the program's structured 28 lessons, students are encouraged to get acquainted with whole foods — such as lentils, greens and pomegranates — that traditionally kids are not supposed to like.

This could be a tough sell and, as Seipp-Williams reminded his Stadium School class one day, there is a "No Yuck" rule in place. You don't have to like a dish, he told the class, but you can't disre-



Teacher Luke Seipp-Williams (left) watches as Tommie Alford, Alex Barry and Denya Isabelle add ingredients to the stockpot.

AMY DAVIS [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]

spect it — that is bad manners. The students abided by the admonition. Not everyone ate all of the vegetable stew, but no one "dissed" the dish.

The food on the students' plates also can reinforce lessons learned in other classes, the elder Demas said. At the Stadium School class, a map of the world was whipped

SIXTH-GRADER ALEX BARRY

"I NEVER USE TO EAT GREENS OR BEANS BECAUSE I THOUGHT THEY WERE NASTY. NOW I LIKE THEM."

out as students found the country, Brazil, that was the source of some black beans. At Hampstead Hill, students read aloud the descriptions of various vitamin-laden fare and eagerly defined a "whole food," a plant in its natural, unprocessed state. All the students kept food journals, recording what they cooked, what they ate and what they thought of it all.

There was time to experience the joy of cooking, too. The middle-schoolers at Stadium School were an energetic bunch, and as they prepared their stew, they danced for a few minutes to taped music.

Urged on by a parent, who was helping out, they cheered various ingredients. They drew tickets from a bag to see which student won a sack of extra provisions. At the end of the class at Hampstead Hill, the students were encouraged to create food art. The girls constructed pretty faces; the boys went for massive structures.

The program's approach to food seems to have spread beyond the classroom. Kids have carried recipes home, as have parents who worked as classroom aides. At the Stadium School, kids not in the class waited in the hallway for a chance to sample the leftovers. At Hampstead Hill, a series of community suppers featuring meals cooked by students for their par-

ents and friends is set to begin this month.

The class menu is vegetarian, in part, Demas said, for practical reasons. Cooking meat, chicken or fish would require stoves instead of the mere hot plates that classes use, and would pose safety concerns, she said. Moreover, while many kids are already exceedingly familiar with burgers, fries and chicken nuggets, they are not so well acquainted with nutritious fruit and vegetables.

Administrators at Hampstead Hill and the Stadium School had good things to say about the program. Matthew Hornbeck, the Hampstead Hill principal, praised its "tolerant and accepting" attitude toward food. He also noted that the program's push for nutrition had spilled over into faculty life. The snacks in the teachers' lounge have grown greener.

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