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**Cooks in the Classroom**

***"This is the funnest food program ever! I don't like it - I LOVE it! "***

**The Trumansburg Food Literacy Project  
Antonia Demas, Ph.D.**

School food service professionals nurture the minds and bodies of students every day. The food they serve plays a role in the health, behavior, and academic performance of students. Yet many school meal staffs are not seen as part of the educational team. In order to change that perception and provide training to become classroom educators, the Trumansburg, New York food service staff participated in a food literacy education project during the 2011 – 2012 School Year. They were part of a group of community volunteers who were trained as food educators by the Food Studies Institute, (FSI), [www.foodstudies.org](http://www.foodstudies.org). The food literacy project developed by Antonia Demas, Ph.D., president of FSI, is designed to teach students about healthy foods through sensory-based education and link the lessons to science, math, social studies, art, language arts, and health education.



**Fruit tart with commodity dried fruit crust made at one of the trainings**

Sandra Simpson, director of food service for the district, explained her decision to have her staff trained: “As the Director of Food Services for the Trumansburg Central School District, I enthusiastically endorsed the plan of Dr. Antonia Demas and the Food Studies Institute to make Food Literacy a priority for the District. My staff and I were eager to partner with this program so that we could help to develop a model of participation for food service, the academic staff of the school and the community. What a great decision it was to participate in this program. We anticipated that we would experience great leadership, involvement and learning from the students and this was absolutely the truth. To know that we were a partner in this model program and a participating department was a very rewarding experience.”

FSI acquired a grant from a local foundation and community donations to administer the program and purchase supplies. The Trumansburg School District set aside funds to cover the costs of staff staying an extra hour to teach the program after they were trained and to attend weekly meetings with the other food literacy educators. Instead of leaving work around 1:30 food service staff taught from 1:30 to 2:30. Food service director from the Ithaca School District, Denise Agati, showed her interest and support of this model by attending both trainings offered by FSI and she volunteered each week in Trumansburg to experience the program first-hand. Ms. Agati said, "Working with the children directly was a great experience that is the only way to truly see what they are really thinking and how much they really know!"



**Ms. Barry engaging the students in food literacy education**

The students loved having the familiar faces of their school meal staff teaching them in their classrooms about food and nutrition. This inspired more suggestions from students and feed back about healthy foods as they went through the lunch line. Early on one student applauded the cafeteria for being part of the food literacy program (using the Food is Elementary curriculum) and complementing staff for serving fresh spinach and broccoli which they tasted in the classroom for the first time with their peers and enjoyed. That positive classroom exposure made the child excited about seeing the same foods offered in the cafeteria whereas without the classroom experience it was just another unfamiliar food that the child was afraid to try.

Research has shown how critical it is to have positive introductions to unfamiliar health-promoting foods to gain dietary acceptance of those foods. The food literacy program starts with a “no yuck” rule as a way to teach manners and not disrespect the food or the chef. Tasting is not mandatory but by making it fun and having the peer influence, students are very receptive to trying new tastes and evaluating them with their peers.

One second grade classroom posted the following on their class website:  
“Today was the last day of the food program. Did we think we would ever see children willingly eat dandelion leaves and kale? Amazing! With nutrition as a focus,

Antonia and volunteers made trying greens an adventure! What a fun and educational experience!!

Students made bean dip. Here are some of the comments we overheard...

"This is the funnest food program ever!" "I don't like it - I LOVE it! " "I don't want it to end." "Whenever we make something, it is delicious!" "I love the food program."  
"You get to make food - I want to do it when I grow up."



**Ms. Heather (head cook) and Ms. Vicki with the bean dip**

The food literacy program took place in the entire elementary school this year. The students loved the program and were exposed to healthy local foods as well as healthy commodity foods. Local Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms such as Stick and Stone and Sweetland, donated seasonal produce for students to try. A healthy “candy” was made from the USDA commodity dried fruit mixture and chopped walnuts. The cafeteria staff excelled in their teaching ability and gained more respect from students, parents and academic staff in their new role. We would like to continue to build on this successful model.

Ms Simpson said: “Dr. Demas and I are both committed to developing cost effective strategies that other school districts will be able to replicate. The goal is to develop the relationship that food service has with the academic program of schools. Helping students learn firsthand about health promoting foods in the classroom, cafeteria and home is essential. The introduction and education of the students to new food choices was quite successful.”