



Lorraine Goldman
Partners at Work

Program does cook with kids

There is an old saying that an army marches on its stomach. So do other large groups... like schools, for instance. The popular conception is that institutional food is pretty horrible.

When it comes to school food, add the large federal surpluses that often drive the recipes, and you have what we all remember as a pretty boring picture.

Add one more thing in Santa Fe, however, and the picture swiftly changes. For four years a coalition of nutritionists, chefs, parents and school nurses has been staging an assault on this unhealthy banality, educating school food service people and educators, and working for the last two school years at E.J. Martinez and Salazar elementaries.

SNAC (Student Nutrition Advisory Council) seeks not merely to change what children are offered in the cafeteria, but to educate students about different kinds of healthy food through hands-on learning, so that the children will willingly try new things that are good for them.

Based on the award-winning "food acceptance" research of Dr. Antonia Demas in a rural New York elementary school, "Cooking With Kids" brings trained food educators into each classroom in a school. The children learn about ingredients that are new to many of them.

With those ingredients, along with many that are familiar, the students then create dishes that are brand new to them, and frequently a mouthful to pronounce, such as Llapingachos, an Ecuadorian potato dish.

The enthusiastic response of students to these exotic foods is coupled with their newfound knowledge of other cultures in places far away.

The enthusiasm, reports Cooking With Kids Program Coordinator Lynn Walters, carries over to the cafeteria, where the new dishes are offered twice a month as part of the regular daily fare. Children weaned on spaghetti, pizza and hamburgers choose the new dish in great numbers.

Each dish is inexpensive to prepare. Each is highly nutritious and flavorful. The students may take the recipes home and introduce them, along with new attitudes about better nutrition, to their families. To date, an average of 75 percent of the children have requested to take the recipes home.

Parent volunteers help in the classrooms. The program has incorporated a mentoring program, with upper grade students assisting in K-3 food education classes.

Community participation adds another dimension. Collaborations and in-kind donations for Cooking With Kids come from numerous local and national food suppliers and preparers, government agencies, and organizations that teach about history, geography and culture.

Major financial support is provided by the Santa Fe Public Schools, the McCune Charitable Foundation, the Santa Fe Community Foundation, the Humane Society of the United States and Kay Adair.

As Cooking With Kids gets under way for the new school year, an additional school will join the program: Larragoite Elementary, with a fourth school possible in January if sufficient funding becomes available.

This is a wonderful opportunity, says Lynn, for community volunteers who like cooking to do something not only valuable for kids, but fun. Required are just five hours a month, throughout the school year. A one half-day training will be provided in September. For more information, or to sign up, call Lynn Walters at 473-4703.

Lorraine Goldman is executive director of Santa Fe Partners in Education.