

A new approach to promoting healthful eating in schools

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The new School Meals Regulations, published by the US Department of Agriculture, requires that by 1998 meals served in schools meet the US Dietary Guidelines, yet foodservice providers often claim that children will not eat the recommended plant-based commodity foods.

To combat this phenomenon and to encourage more healthful eating by children, Antonia Demas, PhD, has developed a new multicultural food education curriculum at Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. Under the guidelines of the program, children learn about, prepare, sample, and then eat in their cafeterias such healthful foods as "dill-lightful" bulgur and veggies, calconnon (Peruvian potatoes with an Irish twist), three sisters casserole (beans, corn, squash, and maple syrup), soul stew (black-eyed peas, corn, collards, molasses), Chinese bean dumplings, pasta primavera, couscous chili, chutney, and curry.

Demas notes that children usually reject low-fat versions of foods they are used to, and attributes the program's success to involving the students directly in the preparation of the healthful international foods in the classroom. The units on other countries, such as China, Italy, and India, and their unique foods as well as the focus on showing how foods connect to

other subjects in school, such as history, social studies, math, reading, geography, and science, contribute to the children's understanding and enjoyment of the foods. To help the children better understand the food cycle, the curriculum this year will allow children to work with fresh herbs, greens, and beans in school gardens.

The pilot of this program was tested in Trumansburg, NY, where the typical school lunch program had previously contained 35% to 40% of energy from fat. The project showed that children will eat up to 20 times more low-fat, high-fiber foods if they first learn about them through hands-on experience in the classroom. As a result of this highly successful pilot, Demas received more than 100 inquiries about the program from school and community groups across the nation. The curriculum has been implemented in six schools across the country and has been awarded the Society for Nutrition Education Excellence in Nutrition Education Award and the US Department of Agriculture's Most Creative Implementation of the Dietary Guidelines Award for 1995.

Educators who are interested in the project may contact Demas at 60 Cayuga St, Trumansburg, NY 14886; telephone or fax, 607/387-8884; E-mail, <ad14@cornell.edu>

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