



Kids First Wellness  
Advocates Series  
Central Falls Civics Project  
- "Changing School Lunch"  
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Communications

**Central Falls** - For the students in Danielle Makarios' eighth grade honors class in Central Falls, the school cafeteria is more than just a place to eat lunch. It's where classroom lessons about representative government and the role of civic responsibility are put into direct practice. As part of their social studies unit on civics, Mrs. Makarios' class is actively representing the Calcutt Middle School population to address an issue affecting the entire school community - improving the nutrition, taste and appeal of school meals in the cafeteria. In the process, the students are learning a good deal about local government engagement, the challenges of changing the system and the economics of the national school lunch program.



To gather information about Calcutt school meals in order to present relevant data to key partners in the project, including cafeteria management, the class surveyed the culturally diverse Calcutt student body to learn about eating habits in school and at home. The surveys gave Mrs. Makarios' class information on what kinds of menu items Calcutt students liked in the cafeteria and they also provided a summary of taste profiles and preferences for what the student population ate outside of school. The results

were invaluable in making recipe suggestions to the cafeteria staff, including specific spice and seasoning recommendations.

The student surveys also demonstrated to the class the need for further education and communication to encourage students to choose healthier foods. When the survey data was compiled, the team realized that less than half of Calcutt's surveyed students (48%) thought it was important to have a healthy lunch. 47% of the surveyed students said they would be more likely to choose to eat a cookie over an apple. Many of the responses indicated that students preferred to spend their lunch money on snacks and treats - like cookies - rather than eating the meals served in the cafeteria. It became obvious that just offering healthy and appealing meals was not going to be enough to change student eating habits. Finding ways to encourage students to choose the healthy meal options as well as explaining why eating healthy was important was going to have to be a key component in improving Calcutt's meals.

As part of the project, Mrs. Makarios' students also researched the federal, state and local procedures involving school meal programs. They interviewed the Aramark cafeteria staff at their own school and researched the government programs that regulate both the nutritional aspects of the food served in schools as well as the reimbursement criteria for school districts. Again, some of the information the students learned was essential for realistically moving their project forward.

"One of the things that really surprised me when we did the research was that the government gives our school just \$2.68 per lunch for every meal our cafeteria serves," said Mauricio, one of the students involved in compiling the data. Shaking his head, he continued. "That's really not enough money for good food, especially if we want to increase local fruits and vegetables in the meals. At \$12 each, gym balls cost more than our lunches."

As the students discovered, it wasn't just federal reimbursement rates that present a challenge to school cafeteria staff trying to prepare appealing and healthy options to a middle school population every day. Aside from budget concerns, the Calcutt lunch advocates also saw how limited

kitchen facilities can restrict staff from serving the healthiest and freshest foods possible. In their conversations with the Calcutt cafeteria staff, the students learned that without a stainless steel prep table, it was difficult to wash, cut and prepare fresh fruits and vegetables for the meal line every day. Cafeteria staff were also sometimes frustrated by their lack of interactions with the student body and indicated that they would enjoy hearing directly from the students more often about the foods being served. Even a simple thank-you would go a long way towards encouraging communication between the students and the cafeteria staff.

“I was very impressed that the kids saw the value of what they were doing and that they saw how making a small change like thanking the food service workers made such a difference in their attitude,” says Andrea Fay, Aramark’s Food Service Director for Central Falls. Fay was one among a half dozen partners that joined the students at a presentation in the library outlining the results of their project to date. “I think that there always will be a small portion of the population that would rather eat a chicken patty than a salad but it is great to see that portion shrinking. If kids like this group can help persuade their classmates to eat better it will be much easier in the future to get kids to make the healthy choices they need to.”



As a direct result of the eighth-graders work, Aramark will be looking into ways to try to get some of the student-requested items on their school menus, including more culturally flavored recipes, as indicated from the surveys. The

district also recently hired a chef to help develop and demo any new, healthy choices on the menus.

So far, the students in Mrs. Makarios’ class have been able to learn a great deal about how to serve as representatives for the common good of the group. Their teacher is impressed by the level of responsibility and professionalism they rose to as a result of the project (even if it meant sacrificing for the common good by having lots more homework!). As advocates for healthy foods, the Calcutt eighth graders are not only trying to change things in their school cafeteria on a daily basis, they are trying to help change things for the better for entire school community’s health. That is a lesson all will benefit from in years to come. As one student wrote in her project portfolio:

“One of the things I learned was that even if we are only eighth graders, we can make a difference as long as we work hard and try to make a difference. I learned that healthy food is a must - we need to take care of our bodies. I am eating much healthier now because of what we learned. And I love that feeling.”