

food MANAGEMENT.



DCB partners monthly with local Chef and Creative Director Rubén Garcia of ThinkFood Group who showcases new recipes using local garden produce. Cooking education is taught everywhere, including the school garden.

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Integrating healthy food and wellness programming into schools

A DC charter school provides three low-risk but high-impact keys to success.

Elle Carne , Kendra Chatburn | Jul 31, 2017

Trends in healthy lifestyle choices and sustainable building practices have increased the pressure on K-12 educators to expose students to these issues earlier in life. Setting a high bar for the country, the nation's capital passed the Green Building Act in 2006, which mandated LEED for Schools Gold certification for all major renovations. Following this federal act, the landmark Healthy Schools Act in 2010 was passed, which was designed to improve the health and wellness of students attending D.C. Public Schools.

Oftentimes increased regulation creates increased spending to achieve compliance—especially if the healthier, compliant and eco-friendly options entail major infrastructure upgrades or staffing increases. D.C.'s charter schools have found many compelling ways to incorporate healthy and sustainable programs with limited financial resources.

Founded in 2004, the DC Bilingual Public Charter School (DCB) provides a 50/50 dual Spanish and English immersion program for a diverse population of over 400 students in grades pre-K-5. Despite the challenges of limited programmatic space, budget constraints and no self-prep kitchen, DCB maintains well-established food and wellness programs, including schoolwide edible education, one of the city's largest elementary school gardens, community composting and family wellness education.

DCB's Operations Manager Lola Bloom identified three keys to providing comprehensive food and wellness programs on limited resources: top-down leadership support, local partnerships and program champions. The common thread in these three keys is effective, frequent and responsive communication.

Top-down support from school leadership

Creating a local school wellness policy is required by the USDA and promotes schoolwide healthy habits. School leadership support for the wellness policy is key in order for staff to implement the policy and create actionable results.

DCB leadership believes that promoting life-long healthy eating habits positively impacts student success and is integral to the school's mission to develop global leaders. This leadership buy-in provides school staff with the support needed to implement food and wellness policies and programs.

DCB leverages national programs such the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program to supplement its dining program. Additionally, participating in USDA reimbursable programs helps offset foodservice costs. These programs have strict nutritional and programmatic requirements, so participating schools need to budget management expenses associated with overseeing program compliance. Continued leadership support to leverage these resources helps staff to further focus programmatic elements on promoting positive lifestyle habits for their students.





Developing local partnerships

Identifying organizations with similar goals can be critical to expanding and improving a food and wellness program within a limited school budget. For example, creating culturally relevant meals with a variety of options was important to DCB, given its diverse student and family population, so it partnered with CentroNía—a local educational organization that also provides healthy meals customized to meet DCB’s program needs. DCB and CentroNía work closely together to develop menus, provide tastings, demonstrate recipes and develop creative ways to introduce new concepts like Meatless Monday.

DCB also partners with Food Corps, which enhances the foodservice program while offsetting staffing costs. Food Corps operates in 17 states and Washington, D.C., and provides an AmeriCorps service member to deliver hands-on lessons, support healthy school meals and facilitate a schoolwide culture of health.

Creating a partnership with families is also key to engaging students in a healthy lifestyle. DCB hosts a free monthly food market featuring items from the Capital Area Food Bank, which allows families to choose from a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. While this requires time to organize, it can be a meaningful volunteer opportunity for families to become engaged with the school’s food programming. DCB staff also provides product demonstrations to help educate families on how to prepare food they may not be familiar with in a culturally appropriate meal that their kids will eat.

Food and wellness champions

Identifying champions from a school's academic team who will support the food and wellness staff provides legitimacy to the program. Teachers and support staff have the most direct access to students and families, so incorporating food and wellness programming into the curriculum (PE, science, math and the like) provides another touch point and a holistic approach to wellness. DCB has a zero junk food policy, and without support from academic team champions it would be impossible for this policy to be successful. Instead of one foodservice staff "policing" a policy, it becomes a collaborative effort that can affect positive behavior change.

Foodservice staff, wellness staff and academic champions all need to communicate with school leadership, staff, students and families to integrate these policies with practices. Actively incorporating feedback while providing education is critical to the authenticity and success of maintaining a strong program. DCB has shown this can be done.

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