

A different kind of school lunch

Students in one midwestern community are enjoying fresh, delicious food plus a big change in their learning environment.

Walk down the hallways of the Appleton, Wisconsin, Central Alternative High School and you will see students focused on their education, interacting successfully with each other and with their teachers. Notice the calmness and purposefulness that sets these teens apart from others. You will notice that the hallways are different in another respect. They aren't lined with soft drink and junk food machines. Then check out the cafeteria. Burgers, fries and burritos have been replaced by salads, meats prepared with old fashioned recipes, and whole grain breads. Fresh fruits and vegetables are offered, and the students drink water.

Grades are up, truancy is no longer a problem, arguments are rare, and teachers are able to spend their time teaching. What's going on in Appleton, Wisconsin?



In 1997 Natural Ovens of Manitowoc, WI, initiated a five-year project to bring healthy food into area schools. The goal was to show that fresh, nutritious food can make a real difference in the student's behavior, learning and health.

Just prior to the beginning of the program, Greg Bretthauer had been offered the job of dean of students at the school. What he saw were teens who were "rude, obnoxious, and ill mannered." Because of problems with discipline and weapons violations, a police officer had to be on staff. Appleton was a school for troubled teens that other schools had given up on, and it was a school out of control.

The story of the Appleton project has been documented on a DVD and videotape called *Impact of Fresh, Healthy Food on Learning and Behavior 2004*. It is also part of their *Roadmap to Healthy Foods in School*, and both are available from Natural Press, at **1-877-628-8398** or www.naturalpress.info.

Principal LuAnn Coenen is amazed at the change she has seen in her school. Each year Wisconsin principals are required to file a report on the number of students who have dropped out, been expelled, found using drugs, carrying weapons, or who have committed suicide. **Since the start of the program, she reported, the number in every category has been "zero."**

Mary Bruyette, a teacher at the high school, reports that the students are now calm and well behaved. "I don't have to deal with the daily discipline issues; that just isn't an issue here." Their biggest problems now are parking and tardiness. "I don't have the disruptions in class or the difficulties with student behavior that I experienced before we started the food program," she said.

Students who previously had been headed for trouble have turned their lives around, according to Dr. Thomas Scullen, Superintendent of the Appleton Area School District. He told the interviewer, "We have kids who have had a lot of problems and got through the whole last year without an expulsion. Drop-outs dropped to non-existent. Kids came to school.

They have learned that with healthier foods it's going to make them a better person. It keeps them more focused and makes them happier." Dr. Scullen had expected that the healthy diet would improve behavior, but he was pleasantly surprised that it has had such an impact on academic performance.

Mary Bruyette says she can demand more, academically, from the students than she previously could. Now she can use all of her class period for instruction. The high school's counselor, Deb Larson, says, "I don't have the angry outbursts, so instead we get to deal with the real issues that are underlying and causing some of the problems in the kids' lives."

Today Greg is dean of students in an atmosphere vastly different from what he saw in 1997.

Typically, while school dietitians want children to eat healthier food, they are convinced such efforts will be futile, and that if students cannot get their fast food in the cafeteria they will buy it off campus. This does not appear to be a problem in Appleton, where the food is not only natural, it is prepared with care. Natural Ovens made sure of this by supplying their own cooks to the school.

Like children on the Feingold Program, once these teens have made the connection between food, behavior and learning, they tend to prefer to enjoy the benefits. One student said, "I really like the food. It tastes good, it's hot, it's fresh." One girl commented, "Now that I concentrate, I think it is easier to get along with people." Another student said, "If you're going for a big test, you want to eat great."

The on-campus policeman, Dan Tauber, is able to be a role model now, instead of a disciplinarian. Students are interested in how he eats to keep in such good physical shape, and have noticed their athletic abilities have a lot to do with their diet.

"Returning students are now the advocates for the program. The kids encourage each other," according to Mary Bruyette. "They set the example for the new kids. It works great."

Many of the changes are being phased in to Appleton's middle and elementary schools. Candy machines are gone and pop machines are being replaced with juice machines or water coolers. There is a district-wide commitment to healthier eating and lifestyle in general.

Even in schools where more modest changes have been made, there are some real differences. Gary Van Lankvelt, principal of the Einstein Middle School, has seen "more calmness and less bouncy activity. Students seem to be more alert and focused."

"We've got to stop using our most precious commodity – our kids – to make extra money."
- LuAnn Coenen, Principal

more are using the salad bar. He has found when the kids are in the halls "we have not had one incident all year that I have had to get involved in with shoving, a fight, aggressive behavior."

Madison Middle School's principal, Fred Ginnochio, says the students are buying the healthier a la carte items and

"I've taught here almost 30 years. I see the kids this year as calmer, easier to talk to. They just seem more rational. I had thought about retiring this year and basically I've decided to teach another year -- I'm having too much fun!"
- Dennis Abraham,
Middle School Science Teacher

Dr. Scullen sees an eventual switchover in all of Appleton's schools. "It can take several years to make the transition. The program will sell itself on its own merits, given the time. I think instead of looking at the food program as a "break-even" we have to take a look at what do we have to put in to make it really good for the kids."

What about increased cost?

Natural Ovens underwrote the cost for their 5 year study that will eventually impact 200 Wisconsin schools. The price to turn the problem around was \$20,000 a year. Natural Ovens President, Dr. Barbara Reed Stitt, noted that "one child arrested would cost the schools more."

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Dr. Scullen believes, "If it results in a happier kid, improved learning, and ultimately a better community, then it's a cost we cannot avoid. It's something we must do." Says Dan Tauber, "Let's invest in the kids now, financially, with food versus invest in them later, financially, with 'how do we correct the problems we have because they are not eating healthy?'"

"Nutrition for students should be part of the general operating budget," according to Mary Bruyette. "We're concerned about everything else. We're concerned about new band uniforms. We're concerned about the football team. We're concerned about text books. Why not be concerned about nutrition? That seems to me the basis in many cases for creating a positive learning environment."

LuAnn Coenen says, "I can't buy the argument that it's too costly for schools to provide good nutrition for their students. I found that one cost will reduce another. I don't have the vandalism. I don't have the litter. I don't have the need for high security."

