



School Health Centers

Changing the School Food Environment One Healthy Meal at a Time

Many children and youth are on school campuses at breakfast time, lunchtime, even dinnertime. The meals that schools serve – as well as the ways in which schools serve them – have a real and lasting influence on student health. As shown by the examples below, school communities, with school-based health centers (SBHCs) as key contributors, can make significant, positive changes to school food environments.

Innovative Eating with Grab-N-Go Breakfast: Fremont High School

In 2010, Fremont High School began offering a free, hot breakfast to any student who showed up to the cafeteria between 7:45 a.m. and 8:10 a.m. Unfortunately, few students arrived at school early enough to eat.



*A student picks up a Grab-N-Go Breakfast.
Photo courtesy of Markell Lewis,
California Food Policy Advocates.*

Fremont's Youth Wellness Advisory Board is a diverse group of students with a shared commitment to advocating for positive policy change and advancing school wellness. With encouragement from the health educator from the Tiger Clinic SBHC, the Advisory Board was eager to improve students' eating habits. They invited the Director of Nutrition Services for Oakland Unified School District to talk with them about possible changes to Fremont's meal program. The Director was impressed by the Advisory Board's enthusiasm and organization and proposed piloting a new way of serving breakfast: the Grab-N-Go Breakfast. With the Grab-N-Go Breakfast, students could pick up a bagged meal at the school gate and bring it to class, increasing participation in the program, bringing in more federal funding, and ultimately improving food quality.

Over the next four months, the Advisory Board, with the support of the SBHC, the School Wellness Committee, and the school's cafeteria staff, advocated for Grab-N-Go with administrators and teachers. They had one-on-one conversations. They created PowerPoint presentations, using data from the statewide Breakfast First coalition. They attended staff meetings to make their case. Some adults were immediately receptive, while others needed convincing. Ultimately, though, everyone agreed to a trial run.

Today, Grab-N-Go Breakfast is well-established and increasingly well-used. Many more Fremont students are eating breakfast – sometimes it's a bagel, sometimes granola, sometimes another entrée, as well as juice and, if they want it, milk. (The Advisory Board gave feedback on the menu, even taste-testing the meals.) The system is efficient and simple: as students walk onto campus, they pick up a meal and bring it to class. Meanwhile, a cafeteria worker makes a tally mark for another well-fed student!

About these Case Studies. *These case studies highlight the contributions that SBHCs and their partners have made to the Bechtel Oakland Wellness Champion Initiative, which aims to reduce obesity among Oakland youth by creating school environments that promote healthy eating, physical activity, and wellness. This Initiative serves as a model for implementing wellness policies at the school level. To learn more, contact the California School Health Center Association's Technical Assistance Director Samantha Blackburn at (510) 268-1038 or sblackburn@schoolhealthcenters.org. You may also wish to visit www.schoolhealthcenters.org.*

Healthier Foods at School and at Home: Urban Promise Academy (UPA)

Over the past few years, UPA – led by Wellness Champions from both the SBHC (called the Hawthorne Clinic) and its Family Resource Center – have made great strides in improving the school’s food offerings and overall school food environment.

At UPA, every student participates in a morning “crew,” an enhanced homeroom experience that includes time for students to eat a relaxed breakfast. The health educator from the Hawthorne Clinic and the school nurse co-lead a “crew,” giving them the opportunity to engage directly with a small group of students. The breakfasts themselves have evolved to include more fruit and whole grains. And, working closely with the cafeteria manager, who is a strong advocate for children’s nutrition, parents have the opportunity to give input into the breakfast menus, improving appeal and quality.

Lunch choices have also gotten tastier. Students advocated for improvements to the school’s salad bar, which resulted in parent volunteers from the Family Resource Center preparing the salad bar each morning to make sure students get what they want. And, at honor roll celebrations, students enjoy healthy smoothies rather than ice cream sundaes.

With leadership from the Wellness Champions and Physical Education teacher, UPA started growing its own food on campus. The Family Resource Center engages students and families in regular gardening programs and in deciding what to grow. Volunteers range from early morning helpers who plant, weed, water, and harvest, as well as more intensive gardening during the summer. The space draws in the entire UPA community.

Finally, UPA is working to improve food choices not just on campus but also in homes. The school collaborates with the Alameda County Food Bank to deliver food to families and the Family Resource Center has convinced local fruit stands to donate to UPA.

From the Garden to the Kitchen: West Oakland Middle School (WOMS)

WOMS is deeply engaged in making the campus and community healthier places for students to live, work, and play. As the final touches are being put on the SBHC site (scheduled to open in spring 2012), the SBHC’s leaders



WOMS students work in their school garden. Photo by Lauren Callahan of OaklandNorth.

are focusing on primary prevention to complement the much-needed medical care that will soon be provided. New efforts to promote healthy eating are bringing many stakeholders – including students, parents, community members, and others – together.

The school garden has been a huge success, providing students with experiential environmental and nutrition education. Groups of students, including the boys’ basketball team, tend the garden from planting to harvesting – and then eat their results. For many, the garden provides an opportunity for a new, deeply engaging and rewarding school experience. This experience has also influence

families’ food choices and habits, with students prompting new meal and snack ideas. Recently, OBUGS, which coordinates the garden program, merged with LifeLong Medical Care (the SBHC’s lead agency) creating an even stronger partnership for health and facilitating better integration between clinical and non-clinical care, between prevention and treatment.

In addition, WOMS families are engaging in a community-based, community-driven series of cooking classes. Organized jointly by SBHC leaders and other neighborhood groups, the classes include an introductory eight-week series as well as specific classes focused on particular health issues. Every session, attendance grows.

Finally, the SBHC facilitates a weekly back pack food program in collaboration with Alameda County that serves 50 WOMS families to help improve their healthy eating habits.