



Launching a Fresh Foods School Education Program

An Interview with Dr. Antonia Demas, author of "Food is Elementary"

Many of us would like to improve the school lunch program, but I believe it has to be done through educating the kids in the classroom first. If you are concerned about the quality of food served in schools, you need to get a group of people together who are also interested in this issue. Make sure there is public support. Look for parents, farmers and farmers' market people who are interested in the school lunch programs and having healthier and more nutritious foods for their children. Get a core group of people together and come up with a proposal.

Your proposal needs to be carefully thought out and well organized. Schools are stretched to the max. You need to offer a program that you can provide initially. If the school perceives the project as more work or another program that they have to incorporate, they will reject it. There should also be no expense involved for the school. Once the school has seen the value of the program they may be willing to buy into it.

Your proposed program should address both education and health issues related to fresh foods. The nutritional advantages of fresh foods should be emphasized along with introducing foods that are available at the farmers' market and teaching the students about the cultures of the countries where these foods are indigenous.

A school education program about fresh foods is a natural for farmers' market programs because farmers' market products are so much healthier than what the kids are being fed in the schools. If more people saw the quality of foods served to children in many of the schools in this country, they would perhaps mobilize into action.

When children are enthusiastic about eating more nutritious food, the school lunch program will have a reason to change. Kids will eat healthy foods when they know what they are through positive, sensory-based education. If you put food from the garden in front of children without educating them about what it is, it's unlikely that they will want to eat it. If you tell them: "If you eat this, then 20 years from now you might not get cancer," it's not a compelling argument for children.

Food education should be an enjoyable experience for the kids, where they also learn about math, science, and the cultures of the world. If possible, bring in food-related artifacts along with music from various cultures to allow the children to have a rich exposure to different cultures. Have the children keep a journal of what they've learned so they can record their food-based experiences.

Use food as a vehicle to teach the academic disciplines. Let the kids cook the food and then eat it.

They will be so proud of what they've created and that they've created something beautiful. If that same food is then served in the cafeteria, because the children have had such a positive experience with that food, they will be eager to eat it. Children will eat up to 20 times as much of a new food item if they have had prior positive exposure to the new food.

Some adults in food education programs have tried cooking food in front of the kids and expected the children would eat it. This generally is not effective. The children need to do the cooking and have the direct experience themselves.

School food education programs should focus on getting kids excited about cooking and eating fruits, vegetables and grains. School meals are often a child's best meal or the only meal they will eat that day. We must educate our children about nutrition so that they can protect their health through diet as they grow. We have a moral obligation to see that this happens.

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[See Resources, Chapter 12 to order Dr. Demas' book, *Food is Elementary*] ✨