

Students in Cheney are eating up knowledge in school this year – but they’re not taking an extra class, reading another book or studying harder. They’re learning incredibly important life lessons – in the lunchroom.

Looking at health issues impacting the nation, including the alarming problem of childhood obesity, Empire Health Foundation wanted to make a difference in Eastern Washington. The city of Cheney was approached to pilot a childhood obesity prevention initiative with the goal of having a positive impact on a local level. Cheney had ready-resources to establish a new program, so starting with the 2011-2012 school year, changes were made in the way the Cheney School District approached food. Empire Health Foundation offered financial support and program goals with the hope that building a successful program within the school district to combat childhood obesity could serve as a model for other communities.

Empire Health Foundation wanted to impact the way families in Cheney looked at food and help them to make better choices concerning meals and physical activity. The project started with the hiring of Laura Martin as a wellness coordinator. She was given a blank slate.

“They basically said, ‘here’s our end goal,’” recalled Laura Martin. “‘Make an impact in this community with students and families. Build a greater understanding with them about why this should be important to them. Find different ways to educate them about their approach to nutrition and exercise.’”

With substantial financial support, resources and backing from Empire Health Foundation, the school lunch program was overhauled. All processed foods came off the menu and were replaced with healthy, tasty options that were made from scratch in the school kitchens. Under the guidance of the experts at Cook for America, the district’s kitchen staff built menus, tested recipes, learned the process of ordering new foods and were taught to budget.

“The students used to get high fat pizza or burgers and fries, chips, dessert, chocolate and strawberry milk,” said Martin. “Now we have 4,000 kids every day in our district enjoying entrees like fresh baked lasagna, or macaroni and cheese with butternut squash, and a salad bar with fresh fruits and vegetables.”

The program launched in September 2011 to all students and staff district-wide in Cheney. After extensively trying new recipes, the schools have scaled down to the ones they know the kids like and the kitchen staff can handle preparing. They continue to add new veggies to the menu and are getting great feedback.

But there’s a lot of work to be done outside of the cafeteria walls. Martin is also collaborating closely with the principals, kitchen staffs, and nutrition services directors to educate kids and their parents about the program and the foods they are eating. They have hosted evening events to discuss the childhood obesity prevention initiative, and have used these opportunities to sponsor food sampling for both the parents and children.

There are other fun ways the students are learning about healthy eating. Last year, 1,000 elementary school students participated in “Vegetable Fear Factor.” They taste-tested six different veggies from three world regions – while learning how and why they’re good for them. And taste-testing is also a great opportunity to teach tasting etiquette. The students also learned about 10 unusual fruits and vegetables from around the world, exposing them to a variety of produce they didn’t even know existed. Martin says these lessons have created positive peer pressure – the children are eating pea pods, water chestnuts, garbanzo beans – things many had never heard of, let alone tasted.

“The response was overwhelming. Out of the 1,000 students involved in “Vegetable Fear Factor” there were maybe five who wouldn’t at least try. Now these kids know there is more in the produce aisle than carrots and corn and broccoli. The really neat thing was talking to the parents afterwards and hearing them say, ‘before there was no way my child would have eaten something like a pea pod and now we eat it at home and it’s one of their favorite after school snacks.’”

In September of this year, all soda was removed from vending machines at schools, and the machines now only carry water and 100% juice. The vending machines in the middle school and high school were emptied of junk food and stocked with healthy snacking options. Even the policy for classroom parties was changed and now teachers receive timely ideas for healthy celebrations. Teachers are also encouraged to offer non-food prizes and incentives to students for doing well in class, like extra exercise or recess rewards.

“Empire Health Foundation helped us organize the first ‘Exercise Your Brain’ training for teachers,” said Martin. “We know the more you move the better your brain works, so we wanted to teach hands-on activities that would help them implement exercise breaks and incorporate movement in their classrooms.”

Even the kitchen workers are finding tremendous benefits in the program. Martin says for many, it’s been like being handed a brand new job. She says they’ve made phenomenal strides, and even though many don’t have a background in professional cooking, they’re warming up to handling meats and cooking from scratch.

“We have been so appreciative of Empire Health Foundation and Cook for America when it comes to our kitchen workers. They have given them support, access to resources, and provided them with training. Members of the kitchen staffs took five days out of their own summer breaks to work 10-to-12 hour days learning knife skills, flavor profiling, sauces, pairings, as well as marketing foods to kids. Empowering the kitchen staff has helped them realize they’re so much more than someone sloshing food on a tray. We have teachers who teach math, teachers who teach history – thanks to Empire Health Foundation, the men and women who work in the schools’ kitchens are our nutrition teachers.”

Funding for this program ends in June, but Martin feels it has had great momentum, and that EHF remains committed to making it work. Empire Health Foundation has also donated \$10,000 for a cardio center at the Cheney High School, and has provided funding to purchase recess equipment to allow the school district to create a standardized recess program. The schools are trying to further encourage recess participation by planning supervised activities like flag football and crab soccer.

“None of this would have happened without Empire Health Foundation’s support,” said Martin. “And the success of this program has helped open the door to other opportunities for us. There have been grants I haven’t even applied for yet and people in Olympia heard about what we were doing and approached me. I’ve applied for other grants and we’ve been awarded more money than I even asked for.”

She says the Cheney School District is incredibly appreciative of the overwhelming support from EHF, and not just financially.

“A lot of times you apply, you get the money and you have very little communication with that foundation. That’s not the case here. For two years I have talked to my EHF contact regularly,” she said. “This is a local foundation that believes in making a difference in the community. I believe they truly have a vested interest, and that’s why I think it’s been so successful.”