



## Making Kids Healthier, One School at a Time

She's only 10-years-old, but Crystal Bahena says she feels as if she has a whole new life and it's because of Action for Healthy Kids' *Get in the Action* initiative.

"It was life-changing for kids and life-changing for the school too," says the fifth-grader at Frederic Chopin Elementary, one of two Chicago schools where the initiative – designed to encourage more physical activity and healthier food choices by kids – was introduced last fall. "I used to eat popcorn and things with the butter, but now every night I just eat the orange and instead of drinking pop, sometimes I just grab a glass of orange juice or water."

Crystal is among roughly 300 kindergarten-to-eighth-grade students who benefit every day from a spruced up school cafeteria, new cafeteria salad bar, refurbished playground and the long-lasting nutritional lessons served up during classroom vegetable taste tests, courtesy of Action for Healthy Kids' volunteers.



**Chopin students prepare for vegetable taste tests**

“One child said to us just recently ‘I never in my life ate broccoli before this,’” says Chopin Principal Antuanette Mester. “So that to me was an astonishing revelation. If one said it, I’m sure there were others that probably never had been given that at home.”

## **Lessons Learned**

Mester and the rest of the Chopin staff are moving the messages of *Get in the Action* forward by making the kinds of changes that will help students live healthier lives. The cafeteria staff, for example, is more conscientious about the nutritional value of school meals. So pizza is now made with whole wheat flour and served sans sausage. Students also are getting steamed vegetables and more fresh fruit for lunch and their science classes now incorporate lessons on the benefits of eating vegetables. And, even though the students already get three to four gym periods a week, teachers have added a few minutes of in-classroom stretching and movement. It’s all working.

In fact, *Get in the Action* and its long-lasting lessons are having such an impact that Crystal eagerly traded her favorite, unhealthy snacks for healthier fare like fruit salad and healthy chicken nuggets. The best part is she’s not alone. Mester says she hears all the time from students who are transforming the way they eat and think about food.

“They’ll say, ‘Mrs. Mester, last night I didn’t eat anything unhealthy. When I was hungry, I had carrots,’ or ‘Mrs. Mester, I did celery last night.’ They come and make comments to me about what’s happening at home. It is important that it’s being carried through at home for them,” she says.

## **Taking *Get in the Action* Home**

One home where the lessons about healthy eating and increased physical activity are getting through is Crystal’s. Her mother, Marisol Lazaro, was on hand for *Get in the Action* and sat in on some vegetable taste tests. What she learned helped her change the way she feeds her family for the better. (You can find some quick tips on healthy eating in [this chart](#) from the latest version of *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*.)

“I used to always cook quick meals, something like a Mexican sausage and just heat it up with beans, something like that. But that sausage has lot of grease. We used to make eggs with hot dogs. And we used to always eat late. I didn’t get home until 6 p.m. So, by the time I prepared the meals, it would be like 7:30 or 8 p.m. That’s the time we would be eating,” says Lazaro. “But *Get in the Action* motivated me. Before I wanted to (make healthy changes), but didn’t quite know how to get there. One of the major things that motivated me is because my dad has diabetes and, for us Hispanics, we’re at greater risk for having it. I do know that and I didn’t want to lead a path where I could put my kids at risk.”

So armed with more information about which foods are nutritious, which aren’t, the healthiest ways to prepare some favorites and new insight into the importance of daily

physical activity for kids, Lazaro made changes in her kids' lives. For starters, she signed up both Crystal and six-year-old son Ricardo for soccer.

That's not all. Gone are the home-cooked unhealthy, quick meals and fried foods. Instead, dinner is more likely to consist of baked chicken with potatoes and carrots or chicken soup or boiled pork served with a salad. On top of that, Crystal and Ricardo are definitely eating more lettuce, tomatoes and broccoli these days and they're learning about portion control. And Lazaro's mother, who lives in the same building, now helps out by cooking for the kids while Lazaro works. So they're eating around 4 p.m. now, not at 8 p.m. and going to bed at 9 p.m.

They're all significant life-style changes. Before *Get in the Action*, Lazaro says she attempted healthy changes in fits and starts, but nothing lasted, partly because she found it hard to get the kids to eat vegetables at home when they were being served sloppy Joes and hard-shell tacos at school.

"If you try to do something in the house, then the school keeps giving them (fast food) it's kind of hard for the kids to actually want to eat healthy at home because they're eating all this other stuff at school," she explains.

Now, of course, Lazaro and the cafeteria workers at Chopin are on the same page and Crystal, for one, couldn't be happier: "I feel good about myself and I feel better," she says.