

Kentucky students take charge by setting up school salad bar

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HARRODSBURG, Ky. — School lunches have changed in many ways over the last several years with more emphasis being placed on healthier food choices.

With that in mind, a group of health sciences students from the Harrodsburg Area Technology Center's (ATC) Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA) chapter initiated a project to give their fellow students at Mercer County Senior High a healthy choice for their lunches.

The group under the leadership of Instructor Susan Readnower received a Students Taking Charge (STC) grant enabling them to set up a salad bar at the high school.

Kentucky was one of 11 sites in the country to be part of Action for Healthy Kids' (AFHK) National Launch of Students Taking Charge during the 2009-10 school-year.

Readnower learned of the grant and information about AFHK through a contact at a local hospital. At that point she met with John Cain, state co-chair of Kentucky Action for Healthy Kids who helped the students gather information for the project.

According to Cain, student organizations located in over one-third of Kentucky counties were targeted with a grant opportunity to implement STC in their high schools. Nineteen were selected from within the state including Mercer County via the HOSA Student Chapter.

The students then began to determine what to do to make their school healthier. They started by surveying more than 250 students and parents gaining information about what they knew about healthy food and such things as the school district's wellness policy said Readnower.

“What they found was that many didn't even know we had a wellness policy and others thought healthy foods were gross,” she said.

The project brought others in the high school together to come up with a plan including the principal, athletic director and trainer, school nurse and the school's FFA chapter and agriculture classes.

"The students also met with Sylvia Moore, Mercer County Schools' food service director and found out the ag classes were growing all the tomatoes used in the school cafeteria. They were excited about that," said Readnower.

With that, the idea of the salad bar was born not only for students to have more choices, but to have more healthier choices.

"I was thrilled to help the HOSA students with their STC project. I am always looking for ways to incorporate nutritious items into school meals and using locally-grown products is something I have been trying to expand for several years now," said Moore.

Cain said the use of local products does many things when it comes to a project like this.

"Using locally-grown produce in school meals is something our organization encourages since kids get a great-tasting product, the time from harvest to table is shortened and keeping food dollars local helps promote agricultural economic development," he said. "Also, kids are more likely to eat their fruits and veggies if they know where it comes from - something that we hope will cut down on childhood obesity."

He added that the salad bar, by including those locally-grown items, gave the project a farm-to-school element which is very timely as there is a current movement at the state level in Kentucky to expand the Farm-to-School program.

In Kentucky, Farm-to-School is a collaborative effort between the USDA, the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, University of Kentucky Extension, the Kentucky Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Defense that brings local farm goods into local schools, according to information from the organization.

Funding for Kentucky's STC initiative during the 2009-10 school year came from the AFHK-Kellogg's Team Grant Program and the Coordinated School Health Initiative by the Kentucky Department for Public Health and Department of Education via the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH) the CDC-DASH grant.

According to the CDC, in 1988 the agency established the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (NCCDPHP), within which it created DASH.

The mission of DASH is to, "identify the highest priority health risks

among youth, monitor the incidence and prevalence of those risks, implement national programs to prevent risks, and, evaluate and improve those programs.”

A final component of the Mercer County project involved creating a video explaining the project. The video will be entered into a contest featuring other STC schools.

Not only did the project bring attention to a healthy diet, it taught students many other things, as well.

“Being future nurses and healthcare workers, we need to promote health and wellness and set good examples for others,” said Kentucky student Brianna White.

“Working on this project has helped me develop leadership, teamwork and communication skills while helping teach others about healthy choices.”

Readnower said the students hope to expand the project next year to possibly include other classes and a physical fitness component.

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