



Healthy Kids **Healthy Communities**

BUILDING HEALTHIER TOMORROWS

Healthy Kids Las Cruces: Las Cruces Schools

At the start of Healthy Kids Las Cruces (HKLC), one elementary school tried every kind of nutrition and activity program possible and measured the impact.

Some programs, like breakfast in the classroom, lasted. Others didn't. Most importantly it brought people together to learn how they can work collectively and improve the health of students by enhancing their nutrition and providing more opportunities for them to be physically active during the day.

"Healthy Kids became a sounding board for everyone to use to make their ideas better," said Nancy Cathey, nutrition services director for the Las Cruces Public Schools. "I think Healthy Kids Las Cruces has allowed us all to still do our work, but it changes our focus so we're all headed in the same direction and you see more success."

HKLC is an initiative supported by the New Mexico Department of Health that makes local changes where kids learn, live and play so it is easier for them to choose healthy foods and be active.

Since the initiative launched in 2008, Las Cruces has made sweeping changes to its schools and built environment -- adding trails, making streets safer for bikers and pedestrians, supporting children in walking to school, developing school and community gardens as well as pursuing more local options for fresh, affordable, healthy food.

None of these changes, including ones made in the educational system, happened in isolation. HKLC has been able to accomplish so much because of the collaboration and support among government, nonprofits, schools and businesses. People from all sectors work on various aspects of health initiative, sometimes overlapping projects to make them stronger and always learning from one another.

"It's probably brought about a lot more change than you would think about," Cathey said. "Getting to know people who can help us is a huge value. You know you can go to that group and suggest or ask for support. Everybody's vision is similar and it allows us to do a better job of supporting one another."

As a result of Healthy Las Cruces' teamwork, Las Cruces Public Schools has one of the strongest wellness policies in the state and the most comprehensive nutrition education and healthy food tasting programs. Thousands of elementary students participate in the

5.2.1.0 Challenge every year. Kids are more likely to walk or bike to school, eat fruits and vegetables at school and know how food is grown.

Las Cruces has the second largest school district in New Mexico, serving 24,600 students about 45 minutes north of the U.S.-Mexico border. Las Cruces Public Schools encompasses 41 schools in the city of Las Cruces, town of Mesilla, village of Doña Ana and White Sands Missile Range. Conlee Elementary is one of 25 elementary schools and the pilot school for Healthy Kids Las Cruces.

Conlee students receive breakfast in the classroom and fruit and vegetable samples with nutrition education every month plus fruit and vegetable snacks every day. They work in a school garden and participate in an after-school garden club. The school started a walking school bus in which adults walk with a group of students to school. Students and their teachers walk on a path next to the school. They have had a jog-a-thon fundraiser and healthy options for celebrations. Each grade has physical education class three times a week.



“I think it helps with student health,” said Janet Candelaria, Conlee’s principal. “I think it’s helped them make healthier choices – they try more foods and like more. They have more knowledge. They are aware of what it means to be healthy and to make healthy choices.”

Several times a year Conlee, with the help of HKLC, hosts cooking classes for students and parents.

“I think the parents are happy that their students are learning about healthy lifestyles and making healthy choices about their food and physical activity,” Candelaria said.

One of the first programs Healthy Kids Las Cruces expanded after its pilot project at Conlee was monthly nutrition education and healthy food samples. Many of the Healthy Kids communities provide fruit and vegetable samples to elementary-school children. Las Cruces is the only district to expand that program to include whole grains and water.

“Drinking more water is one of the main messages of obesity prevention,” said Barbara Berger, health and nutrition specialist for the district who serves on Healthy Kids Las Cruces’ education committee.

Berger wrote a lesson about the importance of water. Kids got to pick water with fruit slices, herbs or cucumbers. They called it wacky water. Berger integrated math into her lesson, teaching kids about fractions when discussing how much of a person’s body consists of water.

All of the monthly nutrition lessons taught by the district and La Semilla Food Center, a partner of Healthy Kids, and are tied to the core curriculum, a necessary component to convince teachers to take the time to participate in a healthy foods program, said Berger. “There’s so much pressure now with testing and teacher evaluations,” she said. “It’s hard to ask teachers to do more.”

Las Cruces receives a grant from the New Mexico Human Services Department to cover the cost of the district’s nutrition program for schools with lower-income families. Berger started the monthly program with a handful of schools and grew the number each year, first convincing nurses who sold the programs to principals.

When Healthy Kids Las Cruces asked why the district didn’t serve all schools, Berger said the question prompted school officials to expand the program. Now the district pays for schools that don’t qualify for state funding based on families’ incomes.

“I think it’s good to have ideas, support and a fire under our rear ends to help us move forward and develop our plan for nutrition education,” she said. “Healthy Kids has been a big support in that people gave input on aspects that we could develop that would be meaningful.”

The goal of these programs -- nutrition education, healthy food samples, school gardens, and cooking classes – is to connect children with food, so they learn how it’s grown, how to prepare it and how it affects their bodies, personal health, communities and the environment, said Rebecca Wiggins-Reinhard, co-founder of La Semilla, which provide edible education in seven schools in Anthony and Las Cruces.



“We’re really trying to show all the links between food, personal health and even how it benefits the local economy,” she said. “The school is the perfect place to engage kids of all ages and their families and the teachers. We are providing more hands-on opportunities for students to learn while still meeting the requirements the teachers have.”

The cooking, garden and nutrition programs through HKLC inject a dose of creativity, exploration and inquiry in a tangible, hands-on way for students who are subjected to a lot of standardized testing. School gardens is a learning lab with potential math and science lessons plus cultural understanding around food traditions.



“It absolutely has an impact on how kids think about food,” said Aaron Sharratt, who oversees development and administration for La Semilla and is Healthy Las Cruces’ lead on the food systems committee. “We’ve seen incredible changes in attitudes and habits as the program as grown. Every year it’s phenomenal. We know it’s spreading to the home with the engagement we see on family cooking nights.”

Creating a culture of change

Implementing new programs and trying to create healthier school environments has required buy-in from the schools. Developing changes in a slow, methodical way is the mantra of Healthy Kids Las Cruces, whether it’s the schools or built environment.

HKLC expanded its nutrition and activity offerings to students by cultivating champions at each school to introduce changes, especially controversial policies like fundraisers. Cathey and Berger built on each success to convince other schools that the changes would benefit their students.

“Ask people to take small steps with you,” Cathey advised. “You’re not jumping to the moon tomorrow. It looks so impossible and people give up. Make sure you get people who support you and go about it in a slow, systemic way.”

Cathey proposes official changes to the school district’s policies once she has gotten half of the schools to implement the policy first. To convince schools to schedule recess before lunch, her staff measured food students ate and threw away. They proved that recess before lunch led to a 30 percent increase in the amount of fruits and vegetables children ate. Today all the elementary schools but one have recess before lunch.

Cathey and Berger are slowly building momentum toward schools offering physical activity for rewards instead of food. At their encouragement, Sierra Middle School held a field day for students after testing instead of an ice cream or pizza party. Another school rented a jumping balloon and classes took turns jumping after testing.

“We’re trying to change a mindset versus a food controlling change,” Cathey said. School districts have flexibility in how they introduce changes to the food they serve, but they have to follow federal mandates that have grown stricter in its nutrition requirements. Because Las Cruces has been slowly adapting menus and introducing healthier food in schools, it wasn’t as hard to comply with the new policy that half the food sold at school events have to be healthy.

“We really have approached everything from the public health perspective of changing things that impact the whole population,” Cathey said. “When Grandma comes to a basketball game and she has diabetes, she can get something at the snack bar that is appropriate for her.”

Changing policies have an obvious, broad impact on the school population. HKLC is aiming for a similar effect with its effort to get kids to change their eating and activity habits through the 5.2.1.0 Challenge. Las Cruces Mayor Ken Miyagishima has led the charge, prioritizing the challenge as a way to connect with children and help them be healthier.

Miyagishima has personal reasons for his investment. His older brother has diabetes, and has lost his eye sight, a foot and a kidney to the chronic disease. A year after his brother’s health struggles, the mayor said he read a report that more children are going to develop diabetes if they don’t start moving more and eating healthier food.

Then HKLC contacted him about getting involved with a challenge that would encourage children to follow the following behaviors every day for 21 days: eat five or more fruits and vegetables, limit screen time to two hours, be physically active for an hour and drink plenty of water. The concept of the Challenge is it takes 21 days for people to develop habits. If children can follow these requirements that long, they will create healthy eating and activity habits. “I thought this is perfect,” he said. “This is exactly what I’d like to do. We just took it and ran with it.”

He estimated more than 12,000 third-graders in the past six years have participated in the Challenge. Every year Miyagishima visits each of the 25 elementary schools to do a kick-off for the Challenge. He talks to the kids about the importance of being healthy to get their education and be successful and happy in life. Every child who completes the challenge gets a Las Cruces coin that Miyagishima has specially made.

“When I go to the grocery store and I see a mom with her kids, many times they will stop me and tell me thanks because their kids are eating better,” he said. “I get that all the time. They watch what they eat and know the importance of eating fruits and vegetables and exercising. That’s good.”

The 51-year-old mayor has lived in Las Cruces since he was in 3rd grade, the same age as the kids who take the annual 5.2.1.0 Challenge. He chuckled about how he has followed the advice he gives kids. He likes to drink an occasional Coke Zero but doesn’t find it possible anymore.

“I can’t even buy it in the store,” he said. “If one of those kids see me, they say, ‘You’re not supposed to be drinking soda.’”