



Steve Frantz, sustainability education consultant and coordinator for the Scarsdale Union Free School District works with children in the classroom.

Beyond the Cafeteria and into the Classroom

THE EVOLVING
WELLNESS
MOVEMENT IN
OUR SCHOOLS

By Stephanie Susnjara

“It looks like blood,” says Dylan Mattson, a Meadow Pond fifth-grader. “I can’t wait to try it!” he adds, bringing a plastic cup of crimson liquid toward his lips. Along with 16 other Meadow Pond fifth-graders, this student had just participated in an after-school cooking club run by Katonah-Lewisboro School District’s (KLSD) health, wellness and sustainability coach, Denise Martabano. This first class covered authentic recipes of colonial Mexico including agua de Jamaica, a tartly refreshing beverage of hibiscus, sugar and water – far less sweet than the corn syrup-laden sodas typically found in school cafeterias.

The students also made salsa verde by roasting green tomatillos, garlic and Serrano and jalapeno chilies on a comal – a flat, round griddle pan that dates back to pre-Colombian times, making this a lesson steeped in cultural history as well as the culinary arts. The overall reaction to this healthful snack based on fresh as opposed to artificial ingredients? The kids drank and gobbled it all up. “Children are more eager to try dishes if they’ve prepared the food themselves,” explains Martabano, whose after-school class is just one example of how the Wellness Policy at KLS D has been gradually moving beyond the lunchroom and into the classroom, integrating learning about healthful foods and lifestyles into the curriculum.

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Wellness Policy

The Local Wellness Policy – part of the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act passed by Congress – went into effect in July 2006. The bill was a response to the disturbingly high rates of child obesity, diabetes and heart disease. To write the policy, each district was required to set up a committee comprised of parents, students, administrators, board members, food service representatives and the public. Since then, widely varying change has taken place in public schools, due to the federal law’s flexibility, which allows each district to create its own set of policies.

Immediately following the drafting of their Wellness Policy in July 2006, KLS D hired Culinary Institute of America-educated executive chef, Andrea Martin, who overhauled the school menu, replacing unhealthy processed items with whole grain foods and fresh ingredients prepared from scratch. But Martin’s job didn’t end there. Instead, she was asked to stay on as a consultant, and has developed numerous programs for students and faculty alike.

And Beyond

Martin, along with district parent and art educator, Ran LaPolla, co-led a Fruit and Vegetable Still Life project in 2nd grade art classes at Increase Miller Elementary School. LaPolla is the creator of Environmental Ant, the cartoon star of a comic strip that has appeared in the district’s award-winning newsletter, “Keys for Healthy Living,” cafeteria posters, and the local *Lewisboro Ledger* newspaper. Keenly aware of the link between the environment and our eating habits, ‘E-ant’ cleverly promotes healthful eating as well as environmental awareness.

Solo, Chef Martin has taught wellness-based cooking classes for teachers during staff development day; and ran world cuisine cooking sessions with sixth- and seventh-graders, who learned how to make homemade pasta, Vietnamese spring rolls and studied and tasted the foods of

ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. This past fall, along with Martabano, Martin ran Harvest Soup Days, at both Increase Miller and Meadow Pond Elementary schools. Over the course of several days, school-wide participation took place harvesting vegetables, preparing soup and eating the final product.

“This is really delicious!” enthused third-grader, Matthew Polemini-Hegarty. His eyes popped when he was told the soup contained over six kinds of vegetable: corn, butternut squash, mushrooms, potatoes, Swiss chard and cranberry beans.

“Katonah-Lewisboro is leading the way,” says food activist and founder of Better School Food, Susan Rubin, DMD, HHC. Rubin is featured in the documentary “Two Angry Moms,” which is about school food and includes footage of the kitchens and dining rooms of KLS D’s John Jay High School and the edible garden at Meadow Pond Elementary School. “They [Katonah-Lewisboro] are light years ahead partly because parents have been advocating on the grass roots level before the federal standards were set.”



Students at Scarsdale Middle School learned about hydroponic gardening, which is the cultivation of plants in a water and mineral solution. PHOTO BY VICTORIA FREE PRESSER

One such parent is Mary Ann Petrilena, a founding member of the KLS D Wellness Committee and current president of the non-profit Better School Food. Extremely proud of the progress her district has made, Petrilena, along with other KLS D Wellness leaders, are quick to recognize other county schools also on the cutting edge.

Summer Rolls

From the Kitchen of Katonah Lewisboro School District
Chef/Consultant Andrea Martin

These Vietnamese-inspired rolls are chock-full of fresh veggies and are lots of fun to make.

ROLLS

- *8 summer roll wrappers
- *3/4 cup cooked rice noodles, lightly oiled to keep from sticking
- 1 cup savoy cabbage, shredded
- 1/2 cup purple cabbage, shredded
- 1/2 cup carrots, shredded or julienned
- 1/2 cup cucumber, seeded and julienned
- 1/2 red pepper, julienned
- 1/4 cup scallions, julienned
- 1/2 avocado, thinly sliced (optional)
- 2 tablespoons pickled ginger, julienned (optional)
- 20 leaves basil, washed and spun dry
- 1/4 cup mint leaves, washed and spun dry

DIPPING SAUCE

Makes about 1 cup of sauce

- 1 small clove garlic, combined with salt and mashed to paste
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- *1/4 teaspoon chili sauce (sambal)
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1/4 cup hot water
- 1 lime, juiced
- *2 tablespoons rice vinegar
- *2 tablespoons fish sauce

1. Briefly soak summer roll wrapper in very hot water until it softens and becomes translucent. Be careful handling paper in and out of hot water; be aware of water temperature.
2. Lay out wrapper on cutting board. Just below the center of the wrapper, place a small amount of each: noodles, cabbages, carrots, cucumber, peppers, scallions, herbs, ginger and avocado (if desired).
3. Roll bottom half of wrapper over the filling and gently pull tight like a big cigar.
4. Tuck up both sides and finish rolling.
5. Cut in half and serve with dipping sauce.

Dipping Sauce: Combine sugar and hot water and stir until sugar dissolves. Add remaining ingredients and mix.

Makes 8 medium-sized rolls

*Available in Asian markets or in the Asian section of your supermarket or natural foods stores.

Chef Martin loves exposing students, young and old alike, to “out of the box” recipes – dishes one wouldn’t think of trying at home – that are easy and rely on accessible ingredients.



Sustainability Too

The issues of wellness and sustainability are tied, linking together the intimate connection between food – specifically its production and distribution – and its impact on the environment. At a recent monthly convening of the KLSD Wellness Committee, members screened a short film, *10% For the Future*, created by Scarsdale Middle School's assistant principal, Duncan Wilson, and head computer teacher, Ken Holvig. The film offers a method to measure and reduce one's ecological footprint by 10 percent, and features some of famed artist Chris Jordan's images of excess consumerism such as towers of empty plastic bottles and other waste.

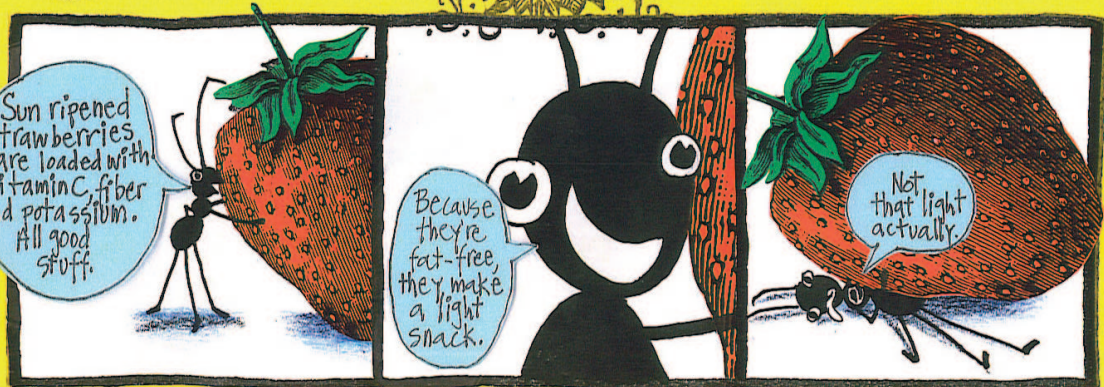
After the viewing, the KLSD committee set in motion the idea of a 10 percent project to take place district-wide, knowing they could use the resources provided on the Green Schools section of the Scarsdale Public Schools Web site. Committee member and high school senior, Eliza Mutino, president of the environmental club, also suggested they run the video on a loop at the recycling station she devised in the high school lobby. Conversely, Wilson has looked to the KLSD for ideas on better school food, touring John Jay High School's food services with assistant principal, Joe Tropodi, whom he is in regular contact with, to witness the revamping of its kitchens.

All Together Now

Steadily, wellness and sustainability leaders throughout Westchester County schools are building communication lines and sharing ideas. A supportive spirit pervades the air as everyone forges ahead, creating in-house wellness initiatives. Lisa Doty, assistant principal of Springhurst Elementary School and chair of the Nutrition and Wellness Committee in Dobbs Ferry Union Free School District, points out that Toby Miller, a nutritionist who heads up the county health department's Fit Kids program and has worked with school districts to conduct wellness policies, has been instrumental in providing resources for wellness leadership.

“There is definitely a network building among us,” says Doty, whose district has also been ahead of the curve, adopting its Wellness Policy in 2005 in response to parents' concerns about healthfulness in cafeteria food. Trans fats were immediately removed from the menu and other changes have continued to take place over time. “We are now in the second phase, reexamining our nutrition guidelines and further reducing fats and preservatives.” The district has just negotiated a new food service management contract with ARAMARK, and will be offering a new dining theme – Worldly Wednesdays – presenting a special entrée from a different culture each week. “Many other cultures have plant-based diets which are much healthier than the traditional American meat and potatoes approach,” says Doty. In terms of impacting curriculum, Doty believes, “education is the most important thing in moving wellness forward. A child needs to understand why whole wheat is

Environmental Ant



Environmental Ant, created by arts educator, Ran LaPolla, is a kid-friendly way to deliver environmental education. The tiny superhero stars in a comic strip currently distributed, among other places, within all four elementary schools in the Katonah-Lewisboro School District.

better than white, why we no longer offer whole milk.”

Thanks to a grant funded through Kohl’s Department Store, the district has been selected to participate in Blythedale Children’s Hospital’s Eat Well Be Well program, where a nutritionist visits and conducts nutrition classes to all K-5 participants three times a year. “The movement seems to be gaining momentum,” says Doty, adding, “Yorktown is also doing great things.”

Continuing Ed

Laura Tolosi, a registered dietician, is director of wellness, a paid part-time position for the Yorktown Central School District. Unlike Doty or Martabano, assistant principal and fifth grade teacher, respectively, in their districts, Tolosi just plays the role of wellness director, yet another example of how each district’s Wellness Policy and it’s implementation continues to evolve in its own unique way. Tolosi’s role includes monitoring food services and making sure that menu items are wholesome and of high quality, which translates into “no high fructose corn syrup, no MSG, no trans fats, but more whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables.”

Creating fitness regimes for students, parents and faculty is also a top priority for Tolosi, who has created partnerships with local gyms, obtaining discounted memberships. She has also started an employee after-work physical activities program, which includes hip hop, Pilates, kickboxing and Weight Watchers’ classes. Future plans include adding a farmers’ market day and more sustainability programs.

School gardens are also on the agenda, prompting Tolosi to take part in a Growing School Gardens Class taught by KLSD’s Martabano at Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture.

Many educators are continually beefing up their wellness and sustainability know-how. Last year, both Cara Forray, health teacher, and Dawn Rivellini, family and consumer sciences teacher, of Scarsdale Middle School participated in a week-long course program on sustainability at the district’s Summer Teacher’s Institute. “Afterward we decided to co-lead a class for seventh graders called “The Edible Garden: Seed to Table Experience.” In the course students nurture and harvest basil plants, which they then use to make pesto in Rivellini’s food lab culminating with a “pesto-bration.” Says Forray, “We get the kids thinking about where their food comes from and teach them to make healthy choices.”

Gaining food awareness – knowing what you eat, where it came from and how it is distributed – is viewed as a pivotal element of wellness and sustainability education. Scarsdale history teacher Maggie Favretti teaches “Food For Thought: The Politics, Economics, and Culture of Food” to high school seniors. Although Favretti has been teaching the course for seven years, it has taken on new significance since the dawning of the local wellness policies. Her class reviews the production and distribution of food and how they apply to economics and government. Students look closely at eating habits and assumptions about food as a way into anthropology, sociology and history. Seventeen-year-old Benji Knafo, a student who has taken Favretti’s class says, “every-



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Scarsdale Middle School students baked pumpkin pies, made from pumpkins they grew and harvested at the Middle School. The students then donated the pies to a local soup kitchen.

one looks forward to Favretti's class because it relates to our daily lives." Knafo describes how eye-opening it was to take a trip with Favretti to the grocery store to learn how products are marketed and manipulated in terms of store location.

Seventeen-year-old KLS D high school senior, Eliza Mutino, is also fascinated – and concerned – about where her food comes from. So much so that last fall she conducted a "100-mile Diet" experiment as part of a science research project, recruiting five others to join her in eating only foods grown within a hundred-mile radius of their homes. The results were the exact opposite of the experiment in the praised documentary *Super Size Me*, in which the protagonist eats only McDonalds' foods for one month and watches his health status plummet. After 30 days, Mutino's study group had improved their overall health. "Everyone's triglycerides dropped between 10 to 30 points, and we all lost a little bit of weight since local foods contain more fiber."

The wellness movement in Westchester County continues to evolve at a steady clip. Mindful, educated eaters are emerging everyday, leading a new generation who desire to take care of their bodies and the earth. ♦

Stephanie Susnjara is a Westchester-based freelance writer and mom.