

# Voices from the CES Network

## “From Scratch”

A school lunch program and service learning project designed to create lasting change by teaching students to cook healthy meals

by Jamie Juenemann

Imagine the smell of warm toast and a baked vegetable frittata as you enter the school building. Come fall, healthy, hot meals will be a daily reality for students at the Centennial Learning Center (CLC). For the past two years, our school has been part of a Federal Learn and Serve Grant. Our goals for “From Scratch” are to create a school lunch program that serves as both an inviting place to eat and a learning center, which offers fresh, locally grown food prepared on site by students, and supports and reflects a college preparatory curriculum. In addition, we will serve as a pilot site for the Oregon Department of Agriculture’s Farm-to-School program. CLC students will prepare and taste-test local food products to determine how easily they can be incorporated into school lunches statewide. This is an exciting partnership for a small alternative school with big dreams for students.

The Centennial Learning Center is a public, alternative middle and high school serving 160 inner-city youth in Southeast Portland. We pride ourselves on providing specific services to meet the diverse needs of our community. Whether our students need academic support, mental health services, college preparation skills, or a friendly face every morning, we have developed programs to meet young people where they are and build upon their strengths. Over 60% of our students receive free or reduced lunch, many have chronic challenges at home, and others face health issues everyday. However, we find that when our students are challenged to think creatively, envision a positive future for their lives, and begin making steps toward a good life, they rise to the occasion.

Along with being academically prepared for college we believe that students need the skills to create healthy lives for themselves, their future families, and the community they will take their place in as adults. Our three-year Service Learning Grant has allowed us to make our curriculum more relevant and community-based. We consistently look for ways to teach students academic skills that are grounded in real work and local service. Our students lack the cooking skills their parents took for granted. The microwave is their oven of choice. During a demonstration lesson put on at the school by the Oregon Food Bank last

year, one student exclaimed that she had never touched a raw piece of chicken. We want comfort food for our students to become baked potatoes with low-fat sour cream, not French fries with ranch dressing.

Our current school lunch program is extremely limited in scope. Despite a large kitchen space, we have only the

tools to warm food that has been pre-cooked and delivered. A typical school breakfast includes milk, deep-fried French toast sticks and sausage. Lunches continue on the “brown” theme with turkey-gravy over mashed potatoes, salad, and milk. We aim to change all that. Working with our teacher Conrad Schumacher, who had previously been a chef, students will prepare meals twice daily. Breakfasts will now feature cheese grits with a side of turkey bacon, a home-made breakfast burrito with low-fat cheese or oatmeal with fresh fruit. Lunches will include stuffed baked potatoes, red beans and rice, or chicken noodle soup made from scratch. Teaching

students how to cook with low-cost, fresh ingredients is a high priority.

Through a partnership with the Oregon Department of Agriculture, CLC students will work with the Farm-to-School project manager, Cory Schreiber, former head chef of the famed Wildwood Restaurant located in Portland, Oregon, to sample products that are locally grown or made in Oregon to determine how effectively they could be incorporated into school meals statewide. CLC students will get to taste test items like hazelnut butter, fresh blueberries and pizza with locally grown spinach. Those foods that are nutritious, easy to prepare, and young people like will be recommended for inclusion in school meals across the state.

The Centennial Learning Center is committed to developing the CES principles as part of our teaching. We are excited to launch a program which we feel exemplifies student as worker, exhibition of skills, and service to school and the community. Come see what’s cookin’.

**Jamie Juenemann is principal of the Centennial Learning Center.**

