

# Cooking with Kids™

hands-on food and nutrition education for a healthy future

Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Field Hearing  
Confronting Childhood Obesity: Creating a Roadmap to Healthier Futures

December 3, 2008

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Written Testimony

Senator Bingaman, guests, and distinguished leaders. Thank you for your work on the pressing issues of our time and for the opportunity to testify before you today. As a parent and as Founder and Executive Director of a small non-profit organization, I am deeply concerned with the health and well-being of children. We hope that the efforts of *Cooking with Kids* will not only benefit the children with whom we work, but will inspire others in their efforts to support a healthy future for all children. I appreciate your invitation to discuss *Cooking with Kids* purpose, challenges, and successes with this committee.

## **Obesity in New Mexico Children**

According to a recent study of New Mexico children 2-5 years old participating in federal nutrition programs, 24% were considered overweight or obese. In a 2005 New Mexico survey of high school students, 26% were overweight or obese. As you are aware, the health risks of obesity are significant, including increased risk for the development of diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and psychosocial problems. In Santa Fe, an evaluation summary of the Salazar Partnership Health Promotion Project reported in 2008 that 28% of the 904 students attending Salazar and Agua Fria Elementary Schools were considered obese. These two public schools have an average of 80% of students who qualify for free or reduced-price school meals.

### ***Cooking with Kids* gets children excited about eating healthy foods!**

*Cooking with Kids* was initiated in 1995 as a volunteer program in two schools with the intent to improve children's nutrition through hands-on food and nutrition education and to positively impact school meals. Through *Cooking with Kids*' activities, elementary school students learn directly about healthy eating through hands-on activities with fresh, affordable foods from diverse cultures.

The objectives of *Cooking with Kids* are that children will:

- 1) Learn to accept a wide variety of healthy foods;
- 2) Acquire practical food preparation skills;
- 3) Learn about people of different cultures, while working together cooperatively.

*Cooking with Kids* serves 4,400 low-income children in twelve Santa Fe, New Mexico schools; an average of 77% qualify for free or reduced-price school meals. During 2007-2008, the organization provided 2,043 hands-on food and nutrition education classes, including 868 fruit and vegetable tasting lessons taught by classroom teachers. *Cooking with Kids* delivers trained food educators, bilingual Spanish/English curriculum materials for teachers and students, equipment, food and supplies school wide.

The bilingual curriculum is a unique, interdisciplinary model of classroom food and nutrition education aligned with New Mexico Public Education Standards and Benchmarks in the areas of math, language arts, science, social studies, wellness, and art that is linked with school meals. *Cooking with Kids* develops and provides curriculum materials for teachers and students, with student materials and home recipes for families in Spanish and English. Activities are designed to correspond to developmental needs of the children, with student materials tailored for grades K-1, 2-3, and 4-6. Guided lessons with fresh healthy foods provide a quality experience that is not otherwise available to students, particularly students from low-income families. As students prepare, share, and enjoy fresh affordable foods from diverse cultures they have multiple opportunities to learn food preparation skills, to exercise choice (children are never forced to eat), and to enjoy healthy foods. Families are invited to participate as volunteers and family cooking classes in the evening offer unique and opportunities for families to learn together.

Many families who might otherwise feel excluded and intimidated by the school environment feel welcome and valued in cooking classes. During the 2007-2008 school year, 1,200 parents and grandparents volunteered in cooking classes during the school day.

*Cooking with Kids* school lunches are served several times a month, connecting classroom learning to cafeteria meals. Examples of foods that students prepare in cooking classes and are subsequently prepared by school food service to be served as school lunches are Llapingachos (Ecuadorian potato dish), Chinese-American Fried Rice, Vegetable Paella with Green Salad, East Indian Lentils with Carrot Rice Pilaf, Vegetable Tamales with Red Chile, and Minestrone with Breadsticks. *Cooking with Kids* provides hands-on training for the foodservice workers who prepare school meals, and collaborates with the Student Nutrition staff to serve *Cooking with Kids* school lunches. In collaboration with the New Mexico Department of Agriculture and Santa Fe Public Schools, we encourage and facilitate the use of New Mexico-grown produce in school meals as part of a Farm to School Program. *Cooking with Kids* produced large-scale posters that depict New Mexico farmers which are displayed in cafeteria dining rooms.

## **Awards**

2005: *Cooking with Kids* received a national award recognizing Leadership, Innovation, and Nutrition Collaboration from USDA Food and Nutrition Services in the category of Partnerships and Collaborations. The award recognizes projects that use collaborative methods and integrated approaches in planning, developing, and delivering nutrition education involving multiple Food and Nutrition Services programs, which include Food Stamp and Child Nutrition programs.

2007: *Cooking with Kids, Inc.* was chosen as the non-profit to receive a national Innovation in Prevention Award by the United States Department of Health and Human Services for its efforts in promoting healthy lifestyles in communities.

Children's voices:

*I love Cooking with Kids! I can make things I didn't think I'd like, but I do!*

*CWK helps us to learn to eat more healthy foods and less junk food.*

*Lentils have iron - that makes you strong.*

*We learned what India eats.*  
*We learned how to cook and clean up after ourselves.*  
*I learned to do the rice with my mom.*  
*We know where the food is from.*  
*We learned how to hold the knives.*  
*We cleaned our hands and everything else.*  
*Cooking with Kids makes us feel healthy and not tired.*  
*Chinese Fried Rice has lots of vegetables.*  
*I think we learned how to work better together.*  
*Try new things because maybe you will like them.*  
*The fruit salad is healthy because it has vitamins and minerals.*  
*You have to be patient.*  
*When you cook it's good and you're doing something for yourself.*  
*There is joy in my mouth now!*

## **Challenges**

Our current eating and lifestyle patterns are a reflection of societal values. As a result, the challenges are many, including cheap processed foods, conflicting messages, a dearth of cooking skills, and lack of availability of affordable, healthful foods in many areas. In the realm of school meals, status afforded to women who cook for our children is very low, with accompanying low salaries. Were we to give school foodservice workers the status and remuneration of high-powered chefs, we would be making a meaningful statement about our priorities.

Lack of time for health and wellness programming is a growing challenge, as the demands of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are increasing. *Cooking with Kids* was initiated before NCLB, which has afforded it an advantage in Santa Fe Public Schools. However, were such a program to become an integral part of a school district, rather than being implemented by a community partner such as *Cooking with Kids*, it could be swept away in a moment by any number of the myriad pressures facing schools: financial or academic.

Sustainability for social programs is a continual challenge. Funding, staffing, and community support efforts must be ongoing. Teaching nutrition using real food is not fast, cheap, or easy!

### **Successes**

The experience of cooking together is the heart of what we do. In this process, we observe that all of the children are enthusiastic participants and almost all children are excited to eat the foods that they have prepared.

### **A few stories**

I consider it a success when a child fishes around in his Minestrone soup that he just helped make, pulls out a piece of kale and says, “I like this.”

A second grade student reported, “You know those recipes you give us? My grandma cooks all of them for dinner.”

A teacher noted that she was happy to have a (CWK) teacher that speaks Spanish because now the Spanish speaking moms who don’t feel comfortable coming to other activities come to *Cooking with Kids* cooking classes.

Two classroom teachers noted that the autistic special needs boys in their classes were able to stay with the cooking activity for the entire two hours without disruption. The boys learned to enjoy the food preparation, enjoy social interaction, and especially enjoyed washing dishes. They were proud contributors to the class.

Two fifth grade classes had “salad parties” and brought in extra ingredients to make big salads to share.

As one teacher commented, “We all benefit as a society when kids have skills, confidence, and a broader appreciation for other cultures.”

*Cooking with Kids*' innovative model of interdisciplinary education for Kindergarten through sixth grade students has inspired programs in several New Mexico communities. Las Cruces Public Schools now offers *Cooking with Kids* fruit and vegetable tasting classes in 14 schools and is currently piloting cooking classes in several schools. Inspired by the *Cooking with Kids* founders and curriculum, Albuquerque Public Schools has adapted the program and materials to meet the unique needs of a large urban school district. In an effort to offer the curriculum more widely, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, *Cooking with Kids* developed a website that provides free access to fruit and vegetable tasting lessons for grades K-1, 2-3, and 4-6: [www.cookingwithkids.net](http://www.cookingwithkids.net). Cooking curriculum, a program DVD, and *Cooking with Kids* school lunch recipes for institutional use are available for sale via the website. Over 1,500 individuals have downloaded free fruit and vegetable tasting lessons and individuals and institutions from over 20 states have purchased curriculum. Several colleges of Home Economics and Extension have procured curriculum for use through County Extension programs.

## **Research**

Funded by USDA CSREES National Research Initiative, a four year research project is being conducted by Colorado State University. Entitled: *Cooking With Kids: Integrating Classroom, Cafeteria and Family Experiences to Increase Fruit and Vegetable Preference and Intake*, this project is under USDA Agreement No.: 2006-55215-18718; Proposal No.: 2007-05062. The Principal Investigator is Leslie Cunningham-Sabo, PhD, RD, Colorado State University; Co-PI Lynn Walters, *Cooking with Kids, Inc.*

This project is investigating the following questions: Does direct experience with fresh, affordable foods from diverse cultures, including cooking and tasting fruits and vegetables, increase children's preferences for and consumption of these foods? Will positive experiences with fruits and vegetables in the classroom plus cafeteria promotion improve students' acceptance of fruits and vegetables? Can family food preparation and eating practices be modified to support more healthful dietary patterns? Do these experiences contribute to more healthful food choices, and thus reduce children's risk for developing obesity and chronic diseases?

Results are promising from initial data collected from 700 4<sup>th</sup> grade students in eleven Santa Fe Public Schools. The preliminary results below are from the first year of a 2-year data collection in this evaluation of the *Cooking with Kids* program:

1. Children enjoy cooking, whether it is in the classroom or at home;
2. Confidence in cooking abilities (self-efficacy) increased significantly in children participating in *Cooking with Kids* compared with children from non-treatment schools;
3. Preferences toward fruits and vegetables were greater in children from *Cooking with Kids* schools than in children from non-treatment schools.

### **Conclusion**

I appreciate your concern for the health of our children and applaud your efforts to make the world a better place. Congress can support increased and sustained funding for nutrition education programming and for fresh and healthy school meals. Convenience and indifference has brought us to this moment. Diligence, attention, and the commitment to work together is now needed to make a positive difference in our communities.

There is value and satisfaction in self-reliance. We must remember the child who remarked, after preparing and eating Greek Pastitsio, "There is joy in my mouth now."

Thank you for providing this opportunity to participate in the democratic process by testifying before this committee.

# Cooking with Kids

Connecting kids with healthy foods  
in elementary schools



I didn't think I was  
going to like it,  
but I DID!  
-Alice, age 10

IT'S FUN TO COOK!  
-GARDNER, AGE 6

I like how we  
worked together.  
-Lisa, age 11



When you cook, you're  
doing something good  
for yourself.  
-Raul, age 9



I didn't know I could  
cook but I can!  
-Jessie, age 5

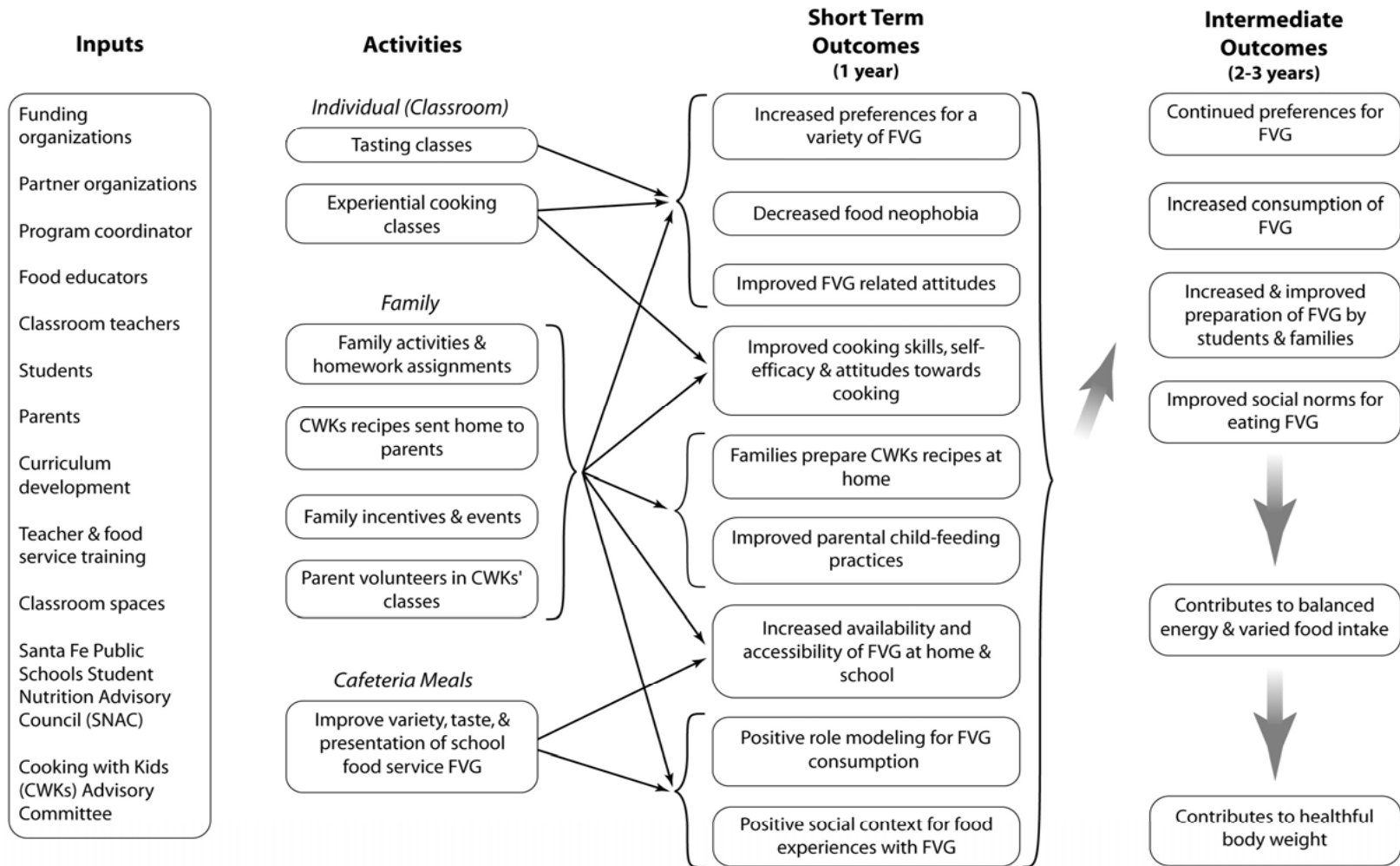


Produced in cooperation with the New Mexico Department of Agriculture

Photo credit: Kate Rowell / From Whines



# Cooking with Kids <sup>TM</sup>



FVG fruits, vegetables & whole grains

CWK logic model developed in collaboration with Leslie Cunningham-Sabo, Ph.D. and Nancy Hood, M.P.H. of the UNM PRC, with funding from USDA (CSREES 2002-35200-12409).