# Healthy School Meals Mini-Grants

# PROMISING PRACTICES

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As part of Pennsylvania's 2019 Team Nutrition Training grant any school represented at a 2-day culinary training session offered through Project PA in the summer of 2021 or 2022 was eligible to apply for a mini-grant of up to $2,500. The purpose of the mini-grants was to implement strategies to improve the quality of school meals and students' perceptions of school meal quality. Required components of the projects included culinary training for school food service staff and student taste-tests featuring items prepared at the summer culinary training sessions or demonstrating a skill learned at these sessions. Eleven Local Education Agencies (LEAs) received mini-grants. Below is a collection of Promising Practices describing some of the activities these LEAs completed to meet the mini-grant objectives. Many of the standardized recipes used by the schools may be accessed on the Child Nutrition Recipe Box and the recipe tab on the Pennsylvania Harvest of the Month website.

## Berks Career and Technology Center

On March 10th, 2023, Berks Career and Technology Center conducted student taste tests involving 150 students and three food items. Grace Calhoun, Assistant Cook/Cashier, was the team leader for this project. The event also involved a chef, the principal, a student counselor, and an officer from Bern Township. The taste-test results were as follows:

***Crispy Kale and Confetti Vegetables*** – 28 students tried it; 96.4% loved the taste, 3.6% liked the taste, 93% would like to see it served in their school.

***Cuban Panini*** – 83 students tried it; 86.7% loved the taste, 13.3% liked the taste, 98% would like to see it served in their school.

***Veggie Panini*** – 39 students tried it; 89.7% loved the taste, 10.3% liked the taste, 95% would like to see it served in their school.

None of the students who tried any of the food said, "It's not for me."

Grace commented that they were inspired to use the kale and confetti vegetables and can now say that their students actually like kale!

## Bloomsburg Area School District

Chef Bill Scepansky from Smart Partners, LLC visited Bloomsburg Area High School and instructed the food service staff in making Mediterranean Quinoa Salad. During lunch he handed out samples of the salad to the entire high school student body, which was approximately 300 students. Students were surveyed about their impressions of the salad. More than 50% of the students who completed the survey said they liked it. This item is now on the menu at the high school.

## Burrell School District

Burrell School District completed a knife skills training for school food service staff. The school food service director led the 1-hour training for 14 staff members. They discussed the topics listed below:

- how a knife is made
- uses for a knife steel versus a knife sharpener
- various types of knives and the proper way to sharpen them
- knife safety
- proper way to hold a knife
- uses for various types of knives
- cleaning knives

Handouts were prepared and distributed which depicted knife skills, included pictures of various types of knives, showed various knife cuts (e.g. batonnet, julienne, etc.), and reviewed how to use a knife sharpener.

Participants were engaged, asked questions, and admitted that they had been using improper techniques and knives.

## California Area School District

At California Area School District, two school food service staff members who had attended a summer culinary training session shared what they learned with their colleagues. One discussed different types of knives, their purpose, and how to use them. The other shared information she learned regarding food presentation, merchandising and marketing.

A chopping demonstration was held at the middle/high school. Cucumbers and tomatoes that were chopped during that demonstration were then used to make Tomato Cucumber Salad. Students had the opportunity to take the Tomato Cucumber Salad as part of their lunch or to try a sample of the salad. Student ambassadors also took samples around the cafeteria offering them to students. Feedback suggested that adjustments would need to be made before adding this to the menu.

Kale and Apple Salad was also sampled at the middle/high school with the following results:

*How does the food taste?*

| Grade Level | # of students | "Loved it" | "Liked it" | "Not for me" |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11th/12th | 33 | 15.1% | 57.6% | 27.3% |
| 9th/10th | 21 | 41.9% | 38.7% | 19.4% |
| 7th/8th | 24 | 20.8% | 58.3% | 20.8% |

*Would you like to see this food served in your school?*

| Grade Level | # of students | Yes | Maybe | No |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11th/12th | 33 | 57.6% | 30.3% | 12.1% |
| 9th/10th | 21 | 51.6% | 41.9% | 6.5% |
| 7th/8th | 24 | 58.3% | 25.0% | 16.7% |

## Colonial School District

Colonial School District's chef, along with a representative who attended a summer culinary session led a training for school food service staff. Head Cooks and Assistant Head Cooks were placed in small groups. Group members read through the recipes for both Chicken Tikka Masala and Carrot Quinoa Muffins, asked questions, watched as the recipes were demonstrated, and then prepared the recipes themselves. Afterwards, recipes were tasted to check for consistency between the groups and accuracy in following the recipes. Batch cooking concepts were also taught and reinforced during this training. The Carrot Quinoa Muffin recipe was modified to use zucchini instead of carrots, as it is what they had available during the training.

Chicken Tikka Masala was put on the menu at Whitemarsh Elementary before a taste-test was conducted. Only 42 students chose it the first day. Later, it was made available for sampling. The next time it was on the menu, 54 additional students chose it, totaling 96 servings as opposed to 42 before the taste-testing. One student even stated this as her "favorite lunch, even better than chicken nuggets and pizza."

At Plymouth Elementary, several students noted the dish was too spicy. Based on this feedback, seasonings were adjusted the next time it was on the school's menu. Eighty-seven percent of students at Colonial Elementary stated they "liked" the tikka masala.

The muffins were not as popular, with about 70% overall stating they "liked" the muffins. However, the food service director speculated that students might have preferred the muffins if they had been made with carrots, as the recipe stated, since they may have provided more sweetness than the zucchini that was used.

## Donegal School District

Donegal School District did monthly taste-tests in each of their buildings featuring Pennsylvania Harvest of the Month items. Items tested and the results appear below.

***August/September: Cherry Tomato & Corn Salad*** – 80% of the students that tried this loved it.

***October: Cranberry Apple Coleslaw*** – 60% of the students that tried this liked it.

***November: Harvest Delight*** – 80% of the students that tried this loved it.

***December: Haluski*** – 30% of the students that tried this liked it.

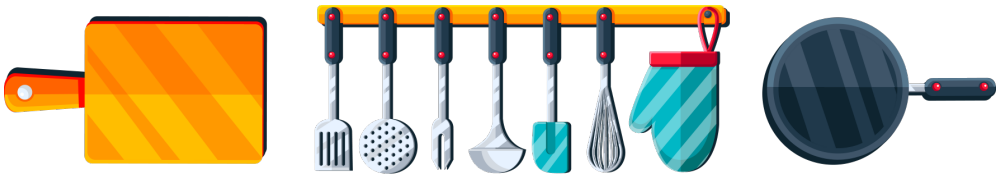
***January: Roasted Sweet Potatoes*** – 85% of the kids that tried it liked it.

***February: Roasted Mushrooms on pizza*** – 95% of the students that took it liked it (but fewer than normal students tried it.)

***March: Cream of Potato Soup*** – 60% of the students that tried it liked it (but fewer than normal students tried it.)

***April: Kale & Apple Salad*** – 50% of the students that took it liked it.

***May: Strawberry Salad*** – Almost every student that tried it liked it. They liked it so much it is now a menu item on Donegal's cycle menu.



## Dover Area School District

On March 6th, 2023, Dover Area School District held a video-based training for school food service staff reviewing knife skills and various methods for cleaning and cooking fresh produce. This was an in-person training which the staff watched as a group allowing time for questions and discussion after each video segment.

On March 17th, 2023, the school district hosted a "K-12 Culinary University" led by Chef Bill Scepansky who conducted live cooking demonstrations and instruction for the 15 school food service employees who attended. Attendees divided into five groups and applied the skills they learned by preparing various recipes that all attendees then enjoyed for lunch. Following lunch there were two final cooking demonstrations followed by more hands-on practice. The day ended with a fantastic graduation!

## Laurel School District

Laurel School District had sent staff members to summer culinary training sessions for several years and found they came back with new and innovate ideas to share with other staff. To continue training for the rest of their school employees, they hired a local chef to who trained staff on knife skills including how to hold, handle, sharpen, and wash knives. They also purchased new knives as their existing knives were quite old.

School food service staff practiced their knife skills by preparing Mediterranean Quinoa Salad which was taste-tested at the middle/high school and the elementary school. At the middle/high school, 60 students participate in the taste test. Only nine students did not like the salad. The remaining 51 students like it and requested it be added to the menu.

At the elementary school, 211 students tried the salad and they were given the options of a smiling face, an indifferent face, or a sad/mad face to circle or color. Results were mixed for this age group, with 85 smiling faces, 29 indifferent faces, and 97 sad/mad faces.

## Loyalsock Township School District

Loyalsock Township School District had a series of culinary training experiences and combined hands-on practice of culinary techniques with a treat for students. Culinary training sessions focused on grain cookery and knife skills and included a culinary video series that was viewed by the food service director and four cafeteria managers. School food service staff practiced knife skills using fruits and vegetables which resulted in fresh fruit and vegetable displays for students.

Elementary, middle, and high school students sampled Pumpkin Bars, Strawberry Mandarin Spring Mix Salad, and Chickpea Waldorf Salad. Approximately 300 elementary students tried both the Pumpkin Bars and Strawberry Mandarin Spring Mix Salad. They especially enjoyed the Pumpkin Bars and requested more! Approximately 400 middle/high school students tried one or more of the tasting items. The biggest hit again was the Pumpkin Bars with many students requesting seconds.

## Northeast Bradford Area School District

Northeast Bradford Area School District received a lot of positive feedback from taste-testing experiences. Kitchen Sink Pasta was tested by 150 students at the junior/senior high school and was preferred by two-thirds over the regular spaghetti sauce.

Sauteed fresh green beans were taste-tested at the elementary school. Students liked them so much that the cafeteria staff was asked by students, teachers, and administrators to put them on the menu at the elementary school. The principal explained that it was important for the students to know that their voices are heard. Cafeteria staff received emails from parents saying that their children had come home and told them about the beans and how much they liked them. Out of 354 students at the elementary school, 255 tried the green beans with the following results:

- 152 (60%) "Loved it"
- 48 (19%) "Liked it"
- 55 (21%) "Not for me"

Cafeteria staff was also asked by teachers and administrators to have more taste testing so that other foods and recipes can be explored.

## Spring Grove Area School District

Spring Grove Area School District utilized a culinary training video series developed by Smart Partners, LLC to provide training for school food service staff. They began with the high school team reviewing videos covering a general introduction, knife skills, and roasting. They purchased new cutting boards and chef's knives to carry out the knife skills that were featured in the training videos. The remaining online training videos were then opened up to the high school and additional school teams to utilize toward the end of the school year.

Garlic Roasted Tofu was prepared and offered for high school students to sample. Fifty-four students utilized a Google survey to provide feedback with the following results:

- 18.5% "Loved it"
- 57.4% "It was OK, I might buy it if offered in the food court"
- 24.1% "Not for me but thanks for the chance to try something new."

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