

Stories from the Field: West Virginia



Cooking Up Change—Ripley’s Healthy Families Initiative

“Meals on Wheels” has a new meaning in the city of Ripley, West Virginia, where mobile cooking schools are changing the way families cook and eat together. Like parents across the country, Ripley parents struggle with finding ways to entice children to eat fruits and vegetables and with shopping for healthy foods on a budget. Despite busy schedules, lack of time for meal planning, and a sense that eating healthy is too expensive, Ripley parents were ready for a change.

Ripley was fortunate to have several factors working in its favor: local farmers’ markets to encourage people to eat more fruits and vegetables and a community with enough resources to offer cooking schools. On the basis of information gathered through preliminary interviews, the Office of Healthy Lifestyles of the West Virginia Department of Health decided to create mobile cooking schools for parents and families in Ripley. Each cooking school taught about 60 people at a time and held four hands-on classes, designed for parents and children to cook healthy meals together.



Survey reports suggested that parents loved learning about cooking while spending time with their children. Nearly all parents learned new ways to prepare fruits and vegetables, and after the classes most parents continued to purchase more fruits and vegetables for their families. Most parents also continued to use the recipes they learned in the cooking school and involve their children in preparing meals. As noted by one parent, “Telling you is not the same as showing you ... the seeing it, the healthier foods, was a lot better than just looking at it in a cookbook and trying to make it....The class and actually doing it hands-on helped.”



Despite the achievements of the cooking schools, the initiative was not without its challenges. The greatest challenge was finding an appropriate location for the classes. While the local school systems were willing to host the cooking schools, due to child nutrition standards, the classes could not be taught in the kitchens. Instead, the classes were held in the school cafeterias, so cooking instructors had to bring in all cooking equipment: pots, pans, blenders, microwaves, and the like. A further challenge was that the school buildings were older, which meant that to avoid overloading electrical circuits, careful attention had to be paid to the number of electrical items running at any given time. The program also struggled with finding the right person to teach the cooking schools— someone with knowledge about nutrition and cooking who was familiar with the community and able to build good rapport with participants.



National Center Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion
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Keri Kennedy, manager of the Office of Health Lifestyles explains, "At the end of the day, the program is really about giving moms and dads the skills they need to help their families eat healthy foods. But it's also about getting kids involved. You need an instructor who is flexible enough to let that happen but can also keep the class going....Kind of like organized chaos."

The Office of Healthy Lifestyles will be offering the cooking schools again, this time in two new communities. As West Virginia is a state with significant regional diversity in food preferences, the program allows communities to have a say in what foods will be prepared to ensure the program will be well-received by its newest participants.

Importance of Early Success

The cooking schools gave the Office of Healthy Lifestyles an opportunity to form a new partnership with West Virginia University's extension agents. The new partnership provides families in Ripley with greater access to high-quality nutrition education. In addition, parents that struggle to get their kids to eat healthy foods can get help with creative, low-cost meal and snack ideas.

Pre Post surveys indicated that parents' confidence in their ability to prepare healthy meals increased from 52.1% during the preliminary interview to 78.2% at the completion of the course; 91.3% said they prepared recipes from cooking school at home; and the percentage whose children had three or more servings of fruits and vegetables a day increased from 39.1% at the time of the preliminary interview to 87% at the completion of the course.



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*—Keri Kennedy, Manager
Office of Health Lifestyles*

Lessons Learned

- Find a location with all the necessary equipment on site.
- Identify a point person in the community to coordinate cooking school logistics.
- Limit the number of participants to 30, because of the hands-on nature of the classes.
- Have program staff do a class walkthrough with each instructor ahead of time to ensure expectations are clear.

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