

Cafeteria Chronicles: Boston Public School District

Teamwork leads to great success in school nutrition.

At Boston Public School District in Roxbury, MA they proved that a large, urban district can achieve big nutrition goals by building from one success at a time. The district recently earned five Recognition Awards from the USDA and Action for Healthy Kids (AFHK).

When the district decided to reduce sodium in their school lunch, they replaced chicken with black beans in a new recipe for Black Bean Pastelón. By making the switch, they not only added five grams of fiber per serving but dropped almost 500 milligrams of sodium. This new recipe sourced black beans from a local supplier and made the dish suitable for vegetarian students as well.

Check out the successes at Boston Public School District in this [video](#).

Engaging with students during their “Chefs in the Dining Room” events helped gain acceptance of new recipes by educating students about the different textures and flavors they may experience. When the Black Bean Pastelón recipe debuted during “Chefs in the Dining Room” students were apprehensive at first, but then chefs saw hesitations fade and the staff ended up serving more than they planned for. These efforts to develop healthier lunch options led Boston to the Innovative School Lunch Makeover Award and the Lunch Trailblazer Award.

To ensure their team is prepared in the kitchen, the district launched a training program to give new employees a baseline understanding of culinary techniques for cooking in a school setting. As District Culinary Manager Alexis Assad puts it:

“So anytime we have recipes come out, maybe a new step is braising. We’re going to send out information on how to braise. We’re going to send out videos on how to braise that we make. And we’re going to make sure everyone has an understanding of what that looks like.”

This approach to training has given the team at Boston more confidence in preparing meals from scratch. Recently, they developed scratch-made spice blends for both their Jerk Chicken and Potato Wedges recipes. By switching to scratch cooking, they were able to reduce sodium and increase fiber. This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Administration. USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

able to control the amount of sodium in the recipes and earned the Innovation in the Preparation of School Meals Recognition Award.

Building on their successes with lunch, the district looked next to breakfast and how they could reduce added sugars. New recipes for Strawberry Overnight Oats, Pepper and Onion Egg Bites and Apple Muffins replaced high sugar grain-based desserts. The district also switched all flavored milk to unflavored and found new cereal options lower in added sugars. Students love these healthier options to start their day, and the district earned the Breakfast Trailblazer Recognition Award.



Apple Muffins



Strawberry Overnight Oats

Giving students a foundational understanding of nutrition was important to the district as well. Many of the schools have full-time, licensed health educators on staff who teach students about different factors impacting their health such as family, peers, technology and the media, with nutrition at the core of these lessons. Registered Dietitian Kelly Thompson hosted “Nutrition in Schools and at Home” where parents learned about school nutrition standards and how to set a healthy example at home. Handouts were available in multiple languages, along with an interpreter on site to meet the needs of the parent community in attendance. By providing these opportunities to students and families, Boston earned the Innovation in Nutrition Education Recognition Award.

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