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Nutrition-minded moms urge schools to think outside the lunchbox

(http://www.suburbanchicagonews.com/downersgrovesun/news/johnson/296188,6_1_NA15_DSELAINES1.article)

March 15, 2007

One night last spring, the Pierce Downer gym was abuzz with the usual attractions so popular with the elementary school crowd - games, displays and lots of good food.

In fact, food was the whole point of the event - but not just any food. Food Fest '06 was all about finding the healthiest, tastiest food to put into your child's lunchbox or serve as an after-school snack.

The fest, held in conjunction with the school's annual open house, not only drew a crowd and changed the way some of us look at healthy food, it also sparked a handbook that is now available to other schools and organizations that want to make a positive impact on children's eating habits.

Titled "Learn To Eat, Eat To Learn: A Guide to Planning and Coordinating a Healthy Food Fair at Your School," the handbook was prepared and is being sold for a nominal \$35 fee by the Nutrition in the Schools Network, a project of the Green Earth Institute of Naperville. Green Earth is a not-for-profit organization that seeks to educate people about nature, nutrition and caring for the earth.

The guide, in a binder format, includes everything anyone needs to know to present a healthy food fair, from a week-by-week planning calendar and room preparation tips to local and Internet resources, games and displays. But while it may look like a huge job requiring a large committee, the prototype Food Fest '06 was the work of just three moms with a passion for healthy eating.

The three, Beth Schuller, Sandra McDonnell and Terese Wall, are members of Green Earth's nutrition action committee and founding members of a similar Pierce Downer PTA committee with the goal of encouraging healthy eating.

"As a school with no hot lunch program, and a reward and incentive system in the classrooms that seemed to rely heavily on sweets and treats, we saw an opportunity to educate parents, students and teachers about healthy eating and snacking alternatives," they wrote in the introduction to "Learn To Eat, Eat To Learn."

McDonnell, a former events coordinator, suggested the food fest idea, and it took off from there, gaining the enthusiastic support of Principal Lisa Mondale. While the school community was a little slower to warm to the idea - some parents felt food choices are a personal matter, while others were concerned about the flavor and cost of so-called "healthy" food - the event won them over.

The trio brought in representatives from several local grocery stores, who offered tempting samples of healthy snack and lunch options - food that scored a big with fest visitors.

"The participating grocery stores were amazed at just how much healthy food was gobbled up by both the Pierce Downer children and parents, so hopefully we helped to plant a seed that healthy food doesn't have to taste like the box it comes in," McDonnell said.

"Another booth at the fair offered price comparisons on organic and mainstream foods - ounce for ounce, many of the prices were very similar - so we dispelled a bit of the myth that you need to take out a small loan to eat well," she said.

Other booths featured an organic farmer, a nutritionist, local high school athletes and loads of information, including a Lunchbox 101 display that showed how parents can replace unhealthy favorites with food that not only tastes good but is good for their children, too.

"After the event, virtually every piece of feedback we received was the same - overwhelmingly positive," Schuller said.

When the women reported the fest's success to the Nutrition in the Schools Committee, members realized it

was a project that could benefit kids throughout the area. With the help of Schuller, McDonnell and Wall, Michelle Hickey Foutes packaged their great ideas for mass consumption.

Based only on word-of-mouth, the committee has sold a half-dozen binders so far, mainly to PTA wellness committees. That number is expected to increase now that letters have gone out to elementary and middle school principals, school nurses and health teachers, including those of Downers Grove Grade School District 58.

At the very least, the "Learn To Eat, Eat To Learn" approach should give school staffers a lot of food for thought.

For more information about the binder, which includes a CD version of the information, visit www.greeneearthinstitute.org or e-mail nutrition@greeneearthinstitute.org.

Elaine Johnson has been a resident of Downers Grove since 1994. Contact her c/o The Sun, 1500 W. Ogden Ave., Naperville, IL 60540, or at dgcolumnist@comcast.net.

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