



Transcript: Nutrition and Student Success

Robert Groff, III, Principal: We opened in 2008. There was a group of four of us that all came from the same charter school. We believed that there is a correlation between healthy, nutritious choices for students, them understanding how to make those choices, and student achievement.

We're a little under 70% that qualify for free or reduced lunch; 53% of our students are English Language Learners, on paper. We're in a very transitional neighborhood. For us, it's really—it's not necessarily about low income families, it's about what's good for all families

We partnered with Fitness and Nutrition for Kids and the Coalition for Healthy School Food. So over the course of the last five years our attendance has been steadily rising, so that at the end of last year, our average attendance for the year was over 97%. In addition to that, our test scores have been on average far above the rest of the state. We've done a big switch to this vegetarian menu and our teachers have observed that students have more energy after their lunch time than they did previously.

The groups that we worked with that I mentioned, FAN for Kids and Healthy School Foods, they helped us with our structure. We had parents coming in in these early days saying, you know, what are you teaching our kids? We had a family dinner night, we have 440 students right now. In that first family dinner night, we had over 210 people come and they got to taste examples of what the kids could be having in school lunches.

One parent in particular said to me that, you know, that he had sent his daughter to school with lunch every day but after tasting the food, he would never send her with lunch again. That's not to say that all of our menu items are flying off the shelves. We keep working on it. Just like academics, we have to always figure out ways to get better at it.

We never planned on being vegetarian when we started this school, but what came up was with the students. In our third year, they started looking at the chocolate milk, and saying, "Why does this chocolate milk have so much sugar in it?" And they recognized that because of what we had been teaching them. And that was the catalyst for changing our school foods. And it took years to get there. Now it took a solid year and a half to get to the point where it was completely plant based. And there's a lot of red tape to go through. And now we're at the point where we are not the only public school that is all plant-based.

My biggest piece of advice is you have to get buy in from your community, your parents, and you have to go slow. You have to really plan it out. And it's not, it's not the right fit for everybody, and you know, it's taken us now, we're in our eighth year and we started from a place where even before we opened we were planning how to work on this.

So what can you do to get the majority of your community to understand your purpose? And you have to be open to making changes along the way. You know, if you're set in one particular track, you're kind of bound to fail. So think about what you can do, what your non-negotiables are, and what you're open to changing with the community, together.