



Padres Unidos Advocates for Recess Before Lunch

The Denver public school system is a leader in national efforts to put healthier food into cafeterias. With its Scratch Cooking initiative, lunchroom workers are abandoning processed foods and learning how to cook. Schools across the city have begun to bake their French fries, include at least one vegetarian selection at lunch, and use more produce from school gardens.

But parents have pointed out another problem—school food might be getting healthier, but their kids don't have enough time to eat it.

Padres Unidos is advocating for policies to change that, with a three-year Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) grant that began in 2009.¹ The project is part of the national program *Communities Creating Healthy Environments: Improving Access to Healthy Foods and Safe Places to Play in Communities of Color* (CCHE).

BUILDING TIES TO THE COMMUNITY

Denver-based Padres Unidos was launched in 1992, building on a successful, parent-led campaign to remove a principal who had forced Mexicano children to eat on the school cafeteria floor as a form of punishment. Led by people of color, the 4,000-member organization has evolved to focus on educational excellence, racial justice for youth, immigrant rights, and quality health care for all.

Monica Acosta was in high school when she first became involved with the organization's youth wing, Jovenes Unidos, and helped to challenge an initiative opposing bilingual education. "The idea that we had a voice and that we could organize as youth to make change... That just changed my whole world," she said.

After graduating from college, Acosta took a staff job at Padres Unidos and is now the project coordinator for *Healthy Students, Healthy Minds*, launched as part of CCHE to engage the Denver Public Schools in making healthy eating and student wellness a priority. Elsa Oliva Rocha is the project supervisor.

¹ ID# 66841

Twelve parents recruited in the first year of the grant serve on the project’s organizing committee. Their early activities included “lay of the land” research—learning who was doing what in the community—and strengthening ties to other organizations concerned about health, obesity, physical activity, and nutrition in Denver and elsewhere in the state.

One such partner is LiveWell Colorado, which promotes healthier living through policy, environmental, and lifestyle initiatives. As a member of LiveWell Colorado’s K-12 Lunch Subcommittee, *Healthy Students, Healthy Minds* joined with the American Diabetes Association, the American Heart Association, the Western Dairy Association, and others to advocate for healthier meals in the schools.

Rocha emphasizes that “talking to a lot of folks” is a core component of *Healthy Students, Healthy Minds*. As a parent-driven initiative, its goal is to make sure that any campaign reflects the priorities of its constituents. “The issue of kids not having enough time to eat their food and play, too, kept coming up,” she says. “Parents were talking about extending lunchtime, but there’s a cost to that and it has implications for staffing.”

And then someone stumbled across one of those rare ideas—a novel, cost-free way to make positive change.

RECESS BEFORE LUNCH

Traditionally, elementary school students eat first and then race out to play. But some schools have started to flip that schedule, sending kids to recess first, and the results have been impressive.

“Our research on schools in Colorado and elsewhere has shown that kids eat better, there is less waste of food, and fewer discipline problems if they have recess first,” says Acosta. “And in the class period right after lunch, some teachers have reported gaining instruction time because there is less transition back into the classroom.” Also, with the recess first schedule, sometimes, students are allowed to carry a banana or an apple from the cafeteria into their next class, which is not practical when recess follows the meal.

Healthy Students, Healthy Minds staff members have taken parents to visit schools that have implemented the recess-before-lunch schedule. Parent leaders are also calling all 90 elementary schools in the Denver school district to find out which are already taking this approach, and they are conducting surveys in the community to gauge the enthusiasm among parents. That kind of participatory research helps secure support for change within the core constituency, and it also serves as an organizing tool to increase the pool of people who say they want to get involved in influencing policy.

The immediate goal of the organizing effort is to interest the Denver school board in mandating recess before lunch for all elementary schools. Following a series of meetings with district officials and individual school board members, project staff expects the full board to vote in April 2012 and hopes the policy will be implemented by September.

A SPRINGBOARD FOR MORE ACTION

The parents involved with *Healthy Students, Healthy Minds* recognize that the recess-before-lunch initiative is only one step in a long chain of actions. Acosta says, “Some of our parent leaders have already been asking, ‘What’s next, what comes after we pass this policy?’ They are saying, ‘This policy is good, it will bring positive results to our children, but it’s not enough.’”

As they consider other opportunities to have an impact, project staff is talking about food deserts [neighborhoods with no grocery stores], access to safe streets, and access to parks. Parents have also expressed considerable interest in learning more about the marketing practices of soda companies in the schools, and taking measures to curb them. “Right now we are in a good place to start figuring out our vision within the theme of having a healthier life,” explains Rocha. “Winning this policy is just a step towards that larger vision.”

More information is available at the Padres Unidos [website](#).

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