

USDA's School Kitchen Grants Benefit Meal Programs and Students

Ygnacio Valley Elementary School

Concord, California

This fact sheet is part of a series exploring the effects of kitchen equipment grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture on students and meal programs around the country. For more school case studies and the companion issue brief, please visit www.pewtrusts.org/school-kitchen-grants.

Aging food service facilities pose challenges for the nutrition staff in the Mount Diablo Unified School District, which enrolls more than 31,000 children in suburban Contra Costa County, California. "Many of our kitchens and cafeterias were built 50 to 60 years ago, and some of the equipment is more than two decades old," says Anna Fisher, director of food and nutrition services. At Ygnacio Valley Elementary School, the worn and dimly lit serving line made meals look lackluster and caused frequent frustration for staff. "Space was so limited that often we couldn't display all the food and had to have someone stand at the door to pass it out," Fisher recalls.

Using funds from a U.S. Department of Agriculture kitchen equipment grant, the district purchased a replacement serving counter to solve these problems and improve the appeal of school meals. The new, larger line includes heated and refrigerated serving wells to keep dishes at proper temperatures, a salad bar, and under-counter lights that help colorful produce and other foods look their best. The upgrade has enabled staff to adopt techniques that researchers at Cornell University's Smarter Lunchrooms Movement have shown promote healthy choices, such as placing produce toward the front of the line and letting children serve themselves. Ygnacio Valley's nutrition team is already seeing evidence of success from these practices.

Ygnacio Valley Elementary School Kitchen Upgrades at a Glance

Grades	K-5
Enrollment	523
Free and reduced-price meal eligibility	82%
FY 2014 funding awarded	\$20,000
Equipment received	Serving line
District	Mount Diablo Unified School District

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics data for SY 2013-14 and California Department of Education

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Now that the lunch line can accommodate more food, Webb and her colleagues do not need to resort to using as many prepackaged meals and pre-portioned servings to save space. The staff can prepare more of the daily menu from scratch, and for many dishes, students can control their own portion sizes, which encourages them to sample unfamiliar foods and reduces food waste.

“We’re able to give kids the variety they love and present meals in a way that shows how much we really care about them and the food we’re cooking,” says Fisher. “The right equipment opens up so many possibilities.”

For further information, please visit:
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The Kids' Safe and Healthful Foods Project, a collaboration between The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, provides nonpartisan analysis and evidence-based recommendations to make sure that all foods and beverages sold in U.S. schools are safe and healthful.