

USDA's School Kitchen Grants Benefit Meal Programs and Students

Perry County Central High School

Hazard, Kentucky

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.

School cafeterias offer social opportunities that hold extra importance for students in Perry County, Kentucky, where the Appalachian terrain can make travel between communities and to out-of-school events difficult. Because of this, the school food service staff at Central High School makes a special effort to provide a welcoming, hassle-free experience that attracts kids to the lunchroom and gives them ample time to eat and talk. But for years, the configuration of the cafeteria hindered these endeavors.

The three serving lines presented the most significant obstacles. They were too small, and the serving spaces could not switch between hot and cold, a factor that limited the variety of food available in each line. As a workaround, the staff offered fresh greens, vegetables, and fruit from a separate salad bar, but it was isolated in a far corner of the cafeteria, and kids could reach it only after passing through one of the main serving lines. "This increased [students'] wait time, so many chose not to do this," said Linda Campbell, the school district nutrition director.

Perry County Central High School Kitchen Upgrades at a Glance

Grades	9-12
Enrollment	880
Free and reduced-price meal eligibility	69%
FY 2014 funding awarded	\$25,000
Equipment received	Serving lines (3)
District	Perry County School District

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

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Determined to give all students easy access to fresh produce and other nutritious fare, the district embarked on a major cafeteria renovation, funded with local and federal dollars. A U.S. Department of Agriculture grant financed the purchase of new serving lines, each with a large, integrated salad bar and stations with variable temperature settings. Now students can enjoy the full selection of hot and cold entrees and fresh, attractively displayed fruits and vegetables, a change that encourages healthy choices and provides more time for eating with friends.

In the same spirit of better nutrition and added convenience, the high school began offering breakfast and lunch to every student at no charge in 2012, eliminating the burden of school meal applications for families and paperwork for staff. The change was made possible by the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), which Congress introduced when it reauthorized child nutrition programs in 2010 and which allows schools with large percentages of low-income students to serve free meals to all.

Since Perry County opted in to CEP, its meal program participation rates and revenue have increased, enabling Campbell to invest in additional upgrades to complement those paid for with the USDA grant. The school installed new ovens, tilting skillets, and refrigerated storage in the kitchen, along with better lighting and some high-top tables and chairs in the serving and dining areas, which also got a fresh coat of paint on the walls. “The mix of seating styles creates a look more like a restaurant, which helps the kids feel that this is a place for them, not just a place they have to be,” says Campbell. “It’s hard work, but we know it’s paying off because of all the positive comments we’re getting from students and staff.”

For further information, please visit:
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