

Thought Leadership Corner – August 2015



By: Patti Garrett

About the Author

Patti Garrett has been a City Commissioner in the City of Decatur since 2009 and is a 2012 graduate of Leadership DeKalb. A graduate of Texas Christian University and the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, Patti is also a Consulting Dietitian/Nutritionist who serves as the Consulting Dietitian with the Champions for Healthy Kids grant awarded to New American Pathways by the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Foundation and the General Mills Foundation.

The New American Pathways' Education and Youth Department serves three local schools and over 150 children throughout the school year.

Food for Thought - and Thoughtful Food

Participating in the writing of a grant proposal and seeing it come to life are, no doubt, two very different realities. New American Pathways has for the second year in a row received a “Champions for Healthy Kids” educational grant provided by General Mills to support grassroots programs promoting healthy eating and active lifestyles with refugee youth and their families. The first year, I helped develop the program for middle school youth in New American Pathways’ “Pathways to Bright Futures” afterschool program. This year, we will take lessons learned and introduce the program to the elementary afterschool program. One thing is clear: We are ALL learning from this deliciously educational experience!

As the consulting dietitian, my visits to afterschool included participating in Zumba, making healthy snacks, watching the kids enjoy yoga and working with an active group of boys who were learning about sugar. The highlight of my day was when they asked if I would come back the next day!

Graduate students in the nutrition program at Georgia State University provided Saturday morning interactive nutrition learning opportunities for parents. It was an opportunity for education at its best—the students learning how to involve parents through an interpreter and becoming more aware of the challenges presented by living in a new place with new foods, a new language and different customs while parents learned new concepts and participated in learning to read nutrition labels. A note received from one of the nutrition students to me said: “It has been such a pleasure doing this series of presentations. I would be more than happy to continue participating in the next year.” We also have a grocery store tour planned in Thrifftown as another opportunity to blend knowledge about familiar foods with new ideas.

One of the challenges we faced, and a lesson learned, was how to assess behavior change and learning—an important part of our grant proposal. Paper and pencil tests did not work! I had observed in conversations with the kids that they could tell me about foods that were high in fiber and why that was important. They could tell me what their favorite fruits and vegetables were and the kinds of vegetables they ate for dinner or that their parents grew on patios or back porches. But the concept of counting numbers of servings (How many vegetables do you eat every day?) was indeed an abstract one and one that did not translate well to the students as written questions!

In researching alternate methods of reporting, I was able to find other grant recipients who utilized in-depth interviews with project participants as a key measurement. Mary Kathryn Tippett, then Middle School Youth Senior Coordinator, developed appropriate surveys that were administered orally to randomly selected participants. Surveys indicated that the students had significantly increased knowledge of nutrition concepts, enjoyed the healthy snacks they prepared, tried new foods and learned and participated in new activities like basketball and volleyball. A delightful mix of growing and discovering!

Yes, we are ALL learning, and I look forward to seeing new lessons come to life for our elementary school students!