

The Lunch Tray®

kids and food, in school and out

TLT Interview: A Missouri School District Makes Food and Wellness a Priority

by BETTINA ELIAS SIEGEL on JULY 24, 2012

Some time ago, I “met” via email chef Rob Corliss, founder of [ATE \(All Things Epicurean\)](#). Rob volunteers as the “Executive Chef of Wellness” for schools in Nixa, Missouri, a district that’s been working hard to improve school food and student wellness. Today I’m pleased to share my interview with Rob and with Dr. Kevin Kopp, the Executive Director of Elementary Education and Wellness Coordinator for Nixa Schools. (The answers below were jointly prepared by Rob and Kevin.)

TLT: So, what’s going on in Nixa schools in terms of food and wellness?



Chef Rob Corliss (L) and Dr. Kevin Kopp (R) on a local NPR radio show to discuss their efforts in Nixa Schools

We wanted to transform and optimize the food and the health and wellness experiences of our kids by improving our current programs and perpetually engaging our schools, food service management company, kids, parents and community leaders to deliver healthier foods to our children and integrate positive policy changes. The school district created a new volunteer position to enhance the food programs, and now has

an Executive Chef of Wellness (Rob Corliss.) This position champions the passion around connecting the students to their food, environment and wellness.

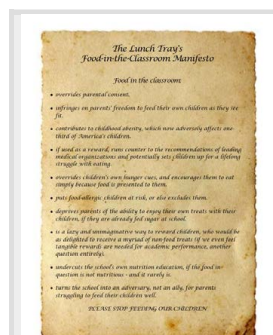
We also focus on flavor and creating excitement around flavor. Our aspiration is to create excitement with our menus and school food programs; delivering “craveable” food the kids love and the school and parents can be proud of.



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TLT: What are some of the ways you're getting Nixa kids interested in healthier food?

The district launched a pilot program called "The Garden Spot" in two schools, elementary and intermediate. Students now have a daily choice to select salad greens, two fresh fruits and two fresh veggies as part of their meal. The students have LOVED the freedom of choice and the showcasing of fresh food. We will be expanding the program beyond the first two pilot schools.

We also do a "Chef's recipe of the month sampling." Our Executive Chef of Wellness comes into the cafeteria on a monthly basis and introduces students to new adventures with food. Students have enjoyed kale chips, blood oranges, garden-jack salad, space salad with star fruit and more. There has been a wonderful response to chef-inspired "live" samplings during lunch. The interaction with the students is energizing!

TLT: Has the effort spread beyond the cafeterias?

Yes, we also have classroom culinary demonstrations that have created a fun and educational forum to explore the health benefits of flavor-packed food. The students are learning about the science of flavor, empowering them with lifelong skills and the courage to cook at home.

In addition, the district currently has four school gardens which provide students with a hands-on education in planting, growing and eating the crops they harvest. It also creates a 360° connection with appreciating the benefits of locally produced, healthy foods. We continue to explore grant opportunities to grow these programs.

TLT: And are you trying to bring local food into the cafeteria?

Yes, we're also continuing to research viable options to source and serve local foods in our cafeterias, and developing relationships with area farmers and teach the benefits and importance of supporting local food efforts.

TLT: I know your health and wellness efforts go beyond schools and reach into the larger community. Can you tell us more?

Nixa's SHAC (School Health Advisory Council) has engaged the community by hosting free and fun wellness events where, for example, parents and kids have cooked a family meal together, designed holiday crafts together, and created their own signature seasoning blends for at home. The SHAC also had an event where eighty people made dinner in less than twenty minutes, and it hosted a 5K run.

We've also engaged the PTA in a discussion on "healthy snacks on the go," as there was a parent desire for ideas on healthy food at home. Many of the parents commented that their kids asked to have prepared at home the food being served at our school recipe of the month tastings and the Garden Spot. That was music to our ears!

Wishing TLTers a happy and healthy 2013! And thanks for support in 2012. 19 hours ago

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TLT: So, where does all this enthusiasm for healthy eating and wellness come from?

There has been tremendous leadership, from the top down, led by Dr. Stephen Kleinsmith, the Nixa Schools Superintendent. We're also thankful to have an amazing support structure in Nixa Schools, which actively supports our ongoing wellness efforts. We truly appreciate the daily passion of the teachers and faculty, the lunch cooks who are on the front lines of school food every day, the open and candid attitudes of the students and the wonderful parents and community of Nixa.

* * *


Thanks to Rob and Kevin for visiting The Lunch Tray today and letting us know what's going on in Nixa Schools. Is your own school district getting creative in fostering healthy eating and student wellness? Let me know in [an email](#) or a comment below.

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Marion Taylor July 24, 2012 at 9:17 am

Awesome interview Bettina! It is so encouraging to read/hear about programs within schools taking the initiative when it comes to children's health. I loved the mention about the power of choice; people are much more receptive when they're told what they CAN eat rather than what they cannot eat. Thanks for sharing!

REPLY

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Emma July 24, 2012 at 3:21 pm

I kind of feel a deep need to know what "garden-jack salad" and "space salad" are. I know that this is rather missing the point, but I WANT TO KNOW!

REPLY

Bettina Elias Siegel July 24, 2012 at 3:49 pm

Me too! I'm going to get Rob to tell us. 😊



REPLY

Rob Corliss July 24, 2012 at 4:08 pm

hey there Emma,

Here are the two salad recipes. The idea was to root these in something familiar & create fun flavors the kids would enjoy & would be easy to create at home. Both were BIG hits. Parents contacted me to say they make the garden jack at home now all the time.

Space Salad (lasts 3 days)

Serves: 4

Ingredients

1 each – star fruit, fresh, sliced into medium-thick stars (approx 12 slices)

½ a cantaloupe – flesh scooped into medium size balls (approx. 16 balls)

16 each – grapes, green, whole, washed

¼ C – cranberries, dried, whole

¼ C – granola, prepared (garnish)

Method

1. Place star fruit, cantaloupe, grapes & cranberries into a mixing bowl and evenly combine.
2. Divide into 4 equal portions and place in serving bowls.
3. Top each portion with 1 Tbsp garnish of granola.
4. Enjoy!

Hints

- Toss the fruit in the creamy honey-orange dip/sauce (sub recipe provided) for extra flavor and fun, then top with granola.
- Granola can be tossed with the fruit for added visual appeal and texture vs. being used as a topping.
- Have fun arranging the fruit creatively on each plate or when entertaining, arrange the fruit in rows or circles on your favorite platter/large plate.

Creamy Honey-Orange Dip/Sauce sub recipe (lasts 4 days)

Yield: 1 C

Ingredients

1 C – yogurt, Greek, plain

¼ C – honey, clover

1 Tbsp – orange juice, fresh squeezed

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Marlerblog (food safety)

Michael Prager

Move for Hunger

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Method

1. Place all ingredients in a mixing bowl and whisk until evenly combined.
2. Place into storage container and refrigerate.
3. Label/date! (CCP)
4. Reserve cold. (CCP 35-38°F)

Hints

- Can be used as a dip for your favorite healthy snacks. Or mix it with your favorite trail mix for a great snack.
- Can be used to flavor fruit salads, by tossing the fruit in the dip/sauce. Also, would be tasty drizzled over pancakes.
- Add fresh chopped mint for an additional burst of flavor.
- Greek yogurt has the benefit of high protein.

Garden Jack (lasts 2 days)

Serves: 4

Ingredients

1 C (approx ¼ – ½ a cucumber) – cucumber, English, small dice
24 each – tomatoes, red pear (or grape), cut in half
approx. 2 oz. – Monterey Jack cheese, sliced into matchsticks

Method

1. Place all ingredients into a mixing bowl and evenly combine.
2. Divide into 4 equal portions.
3. Enjoy!

Hints

- Substitute fresh seasonal vegetables for the cucumber to create exciting new flavors: green beans, snap peas, broccolini spears, etc.
- Cherry tomatoes (halved) could be used vs. the mini pear tomatoes.
- Use both red & yellow mini tomatoes (or even heirloom tomatoes) when in season.
- Experiment with your other favorite cheeses: Swiss, colby/jack, havarti, wedges of baby bel, etc.
- English cucumbers are seedless cucumbers (easy to eat) with a soft outer skin – which are a nice alternative to the typical cucumber with seeds.
- The cheese can be added each time you serve it, to make the cucumbers/tomatoes last longer in the refrigerator.

REPLY

Emma July 24, 2012 at 4:45 pm

Thanks, Rob! I make my own versions of both of these, and now I am totally re-naming them. (For instance, I use pepper Jack in my garden Jack salad.)

REPLY

EdT. July 24, 2012 at 8:13 pm

That Garden Jack salad sounds like something *I* could prepare! And, I think I just may!

~EdT.

REPLY

Emma July 24, 2012 at 4:45 pm

(Oh, and thanks to Bettina, too, of course!)

REPLY

Bettina Elias Siegel July 25, 2012 at 4:39 pm

My pleasure! I wasn't thinking "jack cheese." I was actually thinking "[jack fruit!](#)"



REPLY

Aubrey West @ Healthy Foods for Kids

August 2, 2012 at 10:22 pm



Great interview! So many great ideas I've learned today from this interview. And also for the healthy easy recipes posted here. Thanks!

REPLY

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