

Nutrition education does result in better food choices

December 6 2013, by Rod Santa Ana



Mascots join organizers of the 2013 Eat4-Health program at Rodriguez Elementary in Harlingen, including (l to r) Roxanna Salinas, Prairie View A&M Cooperative Extension Service; Michael Fray, Chick-Fil-A; Beulah Rangel, Dr. Rodriguez Elementary assistant principal; Hugo Valdez, Hygeia; Pat Torres, HEB; and Dr. Rukiea Draw-Hood, Cooperative Extension 4-H program leader. Credit: George Banda, HCISD

Roxanna Salinas was stunned when a third-grader told her he had never tasted a carrot.

The youngster's admission came during the 2013 Eat4-Health, a recent week-long program that taught [healthy eating](#) and activity habits to [students](#) at Dr. Hesiquio Rodriguez Elementary School in Harlingen.

Salinas, the Prairie View A&M University Cooperative Extension Program's 4-H and youth development agent in Cameron County, organized the event that reached more than 700 kindergarten through fifth grade students daily.

"I was shocked," she said of the [carrot](#) comment. "It was such an eye-opener, and indicative of the lack of education many of our kids have about proper nutrition and exercise. But that's all it is; a lack of education. Once kids learn, they start eating more nutritious food and exercising more because it's fun and they realize it's good for them."

The program included lessons and games designed to help students reach six behavioral goals, Salinas said. They include replacing sweetened drinks with low-fat milk and water, playing actively 60 minutes per day, eating more fruits and vegetables, eating fewer high-fat, high-sugar foods and replacing them with nutrient-rich and high-fiber foods.

Other goals included eating only as often and as much as needed to satisfy hunger and promoting healthy behaviors to others.

"The week of activities and learning was an awesome experience for the kids," Salinas said. "It helped open their eyes to making healthy choices. It was obvious that our efforts really changed their perspective on the [healthy choices](#) that are out there."

One lesson, for example, encouraged students to eat carrots instead of French fries.

"We taught them to get a smaller order of fries, or split a larger order

with their siblings," she said. "You can't realistically and completely deny them something as tasty as French fries – we all like them – but they do respond to the idea of eating less of them."

To help fund the week's activities that included taste-testing fruits and vegetables, Salinas pulled together a host of business partners to help in the effort. They included HEB, Hygeia, Chick-Fil-A and TexaSweat Citrus Marketing.

Agencies that participated included United Health Care, the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, 4-H and the Prairie View A&M Cooperative Extension Program.

"Our area is especially in need of such educational programs because of the food insecurity and obesity that exists in our area," Salinas said.

"Studies show that 22 percent of Texas children under age 18 are food insecure. That means families might go a few days without a meal, or the parents deny themselves food to feed their children. That's the highest rate of food insecurity of any state in the country."

And when they do eat, many of these children often don't get the proper nutrition for a growing body, she said.

"That's one reason why we see rates of obesity among children at about 19 percent in Texas. So the goals of the Eat4-Health program are to mobilize underserved youth to take action to avoid nutritional deficiencies, make healthy food choices and increase their physical activities."

On the final day of the week-long program, students participated in games designed to increase their physical fitness, including jump rope, egg-on-a-spoon races, relay races, potato sack races and Hula Hoop.

"They loved playing these games," Salinas said. "Kids today just aren't used to physical outdoor activities. Technologies like iPods and iPhones are keeping them indoors, so they don't play outside like kids used to, and that coupled with high-calorie foods lead to childhood obesity."

At the end of the program, participating students were awarded certificates of completion.

Salinas gathered comments from school staff and students after the program, which glowed with appreciation.

"This is the kind of program kids need," one staffer wrote.

"Eat4-Health was a huge success at our school," said Traci Gonzalez, principal at Dr. Rodriguez Elementary. "Our students were so excited to take part. We appreciate the excellent efforts in bringing this program to our school."

"We learned a lot about being healthy," wrote a third-grader. "We also got to eat many good healthy snacks. The field day was the best. I saw the snacks on the table and they looked good. When I tasted them, they were very good."

Provided by Texas A&M University

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