

Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction: Grant program gets kids excited about fruits and veggies

Posted on Friday, Jan 4, 2019

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MADISON — What is encouraging 63,000 students from throughout Wisconsin to try fruits like pears and starfruit and sample vegetables such as radishes and broccoli? It's the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, which provides eligible schools with reimbursements for fresh produce offered in the classroom, allowing students to taste both familiar and unfamiliar fruit and vegetable snacks.

The grant program, which is supporting 184 Wisconsin schools during the 2018-19 school year, exposes students to fresh produce they may not have access to at home. In doing so, the program also gives students a nourishing snack that helps sustain them through the school day. Survey comments from last year emphasized the importance of both aspects of the program: "It is so important for our children to have access to fresh fruits and vegetables because they can be so expensive for families, and this program also helps introduce new and different produce to our children."

"Some of the snack options offered were new items that students had never tried in their lives," commented another program director. While some foods like jicama, radishes, and papaya may take more sampling before they become favorites, survey comments showed the unfamiliar pomegranates and persimmons were a big hit, topping the list of favorite foods in many schools.

The program's impact reaches much further than snack time. Exposure to new, healthy flavors prompts students to ask their parents to buy produce they've tried

in school, as well as increases student interest in eating fruits and vegetables during school lunch and breakfast. Some schools also have implemented school gardens or 'garden bars' at lunchtime, which support the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program and continue bringing students and produce together.

"We want our schools to be able to support the entire student, and part of that goal includes nourishment," said State Superintendent and Governor-elect Tony Evers. "The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program gives our students tasting experiences that will help instill healthy eating habits, as well as increasing access to the foods themselves."

The popularity of the program has continued to grow in Wisconsin, with the review panel

evaluating 236 applications for the 2018-19 school year. About \$3.2 million is available in the state for the 2019 federal fiscal year. Those eligible for the grants are required to have at least 50 percent of students receiving subsidized school meals or an equivalent rate for Community Eligibility Provision sites. Eligibility guidelines are prescriptive and require that schools with the highest level of free and reduced-price enrollment receive priority in selection. One commenter noted that "this is the key selection criterion, which ensures that the program benefits low-income children that generally have fewer opportunities to consume fresh fruits and vegetables on a regular basis."

The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program began in 2002 in just four states and has since become permanent and available to all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the territories of Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. Wisconsin adopted the program in 2008.