CookShop Graduation in an NYC Elementary School

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by Matt Gustafson,

Just a couple weeks ago, in public elementary schools across New York City, approximately 28,000 students are celebrating their "graduation" from CookShop as the 2010-11 program came to a close.

The Food Bank's hands-on nutrition education program, CookShop reaches low-income children, teens and families with skills and knowledge to help them eat healthy on a limited budget. AtP.S. 76 in Queens, students marked the end of this year's CookShop program with a special awards ceremony and celebration, which was a great time for the kids (and for me!).

Wearing homemade construction and tissue paper chef hats, all the students in CookShop CookShop Classroom for Elementary School filed into the auditorium. After a short introduction by teachers, the festivities began.

First, the performances. Three classes took the stage and sang "Parts of a Plant," to the tune of "Wheels on the Bus." A staple in the CookShop curriculum, the song helps students learn and remember — as the title hints — the parts of a plant. Next they belted out "Grow Your Plants," set to the music of "Row Your Boat," describing all the things plants need to grow. The performances rounded out with a play about the life cycle of plants, with students acting out the various components of plant growth: soil, sun and water. (Our curriculum also includes a very adorabledance to illustrate the plant life cycle.)

After each student received his or her certificate for completing CookShop, it was time for the grand finale: a game show in which students from each class showed off all their CookShop nutrition knowledge to their fellow classmates.

Principal Mary Schafenburg told me CookShop has had such a profound effect on the school that when it came time for P.S. 76 to become a magnet school this year, CookShop helped inspire their decision to focus on nutrition and wellness. The school's theme, "From Seed to Plate," educates students that food doesn't come from the grocery store but from the earth (a lesson CookShop emphasizes, too).

As part of their new health focus, the school has a partnership with Brooklyn Grange, a rooftop garden students can visit and work in. The school is also in the process of building a greenhouse nearby. And most recently, they created a walking day in which all the students were given pedometers to chart how far they walk each day and promote activity and healthy exercise.

All in all, it was wonderful to see the kids at P.S. 76 have such a blast and take pride in their CookShop learning, their cooking skills and their excitement about their future pursuits in healthy living and eating.

Matt Gustafson, Site Monitor, ensures the proper evaluation and implementation of the various CookShop components throughout the five boroughs.