

"Soon school officials will accept as their responsibility the serving of hot lunches in the schools just as they hire teachers and buy books," a St. Louis County Extension home demonstration agent wrote in 1935. Her prediction was spot-on. Just five years later, hot lunch programs were established in more than 200 Minnesota schools. Extension food preparation specialists scrambled to teach school cooks how to prepare nutritious lunches kids would love (or at least eat). Today, Extension educators have added a new twist to promoting good nutrition for life with a wildly fun program that helps children understand the why and how of healthy eating.



Beginning in 1941, retired Extension food and nutrition specialist Verna Mikesh worked with Minnesota schools to prepare healthier lunches on limited resources.

Wild ideas

Promoting good nutrition in schools

When Extension nutrition education assistant Tracy Baker uses a dirty bottle and a scrub brush to demonstrate the importance of digestive-tract-cleansing fiber in the diet, kids' first reaction is, "Ewww!"

Their second reaction? " 'Oh, that's why we eat the peelings, and why we eat fruits and vegetables,' " Baker says. "They get that."

Last year some 3,600 grade-school children learned about the what, why, and how of good food and physical activity through Go Wild With Fruits and Vegetables. Baker is one of nine nutrition education assistants who piloted Extension's activity-packed nutrition curriculum, Go Wild, in 22 schools in the Moorhead region.

"It was an outstanding program," says Frazee third-grade teacher Kathy Peichel.

Promoting good nutrition in schools is a longstanding tradition for Extension. In the 1930s Extension helped establish school lunch programs. In the 1940s and '50s,



Extension nutritionists taught school lunch staff around the state how to transform surplus commodities into healthful meals.

"They were given a certain standard they had to meet with their menus," recalls retired Extension food and nutrition specialist Verna Mikesh, who worked with Minnesota schools from 1941 to 1971. "A lot of the stuff they got was commodity cheese, eggs, dry milk, beans, canned meat. We had to work with them to help them utilize these things," she says. Mikesh also conducted informal school lunch evaluations.

Throughout the years, Extension educators have visited classrooms, teaching

children the importance of eating right. Today the need seems stronger than ever. Thanks in part to the appeal and widespread presence of junk food, the percent of children ages 6–11 who are overweight nearly tripled between 1976 and 2004, from 6.5 to 18.8 percent.

Enter Go Wild. Developed by a team of Extension nutrition experts and nutrition education assistants, the grade-school program includes a feast of fun to help kids and their families understand the how and why of nutrition. Each month, a nutrition education assistant visits the classroom, bringing stories, songs, games, a variety of

'Thank you for helping me'

Sixth grader Nichole had never even heard of a parsnip before "the Go Wild Lady" showed up at her Detroit Lakes area school last fall. Now it's one of her favorite vegetables.

Through a nutrition journal, Nichole told Extension nutrition education assistant Tracy Baker how important Go Wild was to her. Her previous snacking habits led to weight gain. Go Wild gave her the knowledge and motivation to make a change.

"I learned that fruits and vegetables may look gross but are yummy," Nichole wrote. "I told my sister and my mom, and now we're changing our lifestyle. ... Thank you for helping me."



Extension nutrition specialists helped establish school lunch programs in the 1930s. Today, the need to teach children healthy eating is stronger than ever. Nichole (foreground) is one of many children who started eating fruits and vegetables after an Extension educator visited her classroom.

fruits and vegetables, and a message to go with them: Good food and physical activity are smart choices.

"They've always been told, eat your fruits and veggies and you'll be healthy," Baker says. "We told them why."

Baker and her team of colleagues also showed them—in a way no child could resist. Music, "mystery food" taste tests and flip boards were used in conjunction with Minnesota animals to boost the lesson's fun quotient. When Baker walks in the door, the sky's the limit.

"It's opened up her eyes," says Evelyn Estenson of her daughter's experience with the program. "And it's kind of fun."

The Go Wild curriculum is being piloted in Crookston and Brainerd classrooms for the 2008-09 school year. It is expected to go statewide in 2009-10.

For more information on Extension nutrition resources for schools, visit www.extension.umn.edu/Health

Recipe for success

What makes Go Wild so wildly successful? Like most successes, good design is key.

Good design in this case started with involving Extension nutrition education assistants, with their in-the-trenches insights, in developing the lessons. It included stretching the program over seven months, to keep the message loud and strong.

Studies show that children are more likely to believe and act upon a message if they hear it from multiple sources. Using that information as a springboard, Go Wild reinforced its message with posters and by introducing new foods in the lunchroom, food challenges at home, and recipes in local newspapers. For Becker County nutrition education assistant Tracy Baker, good design meant capitalizing on the fact that learning—and good nutrition—really can be fun.

"Tell me a kid that doesn't like to go wild," she says. "It's an easy program to get excited about."

To see a sample lesson from Extension's Go Wild program, visit www.extension.umn.edu/Nutrition

Extension nutrition education assistant Tracy Baker helps third-graders at Frazee Elementary School make "pumpkin fluff" during a lesson on yellow/orange fruits and vegetables.

