



CASE STUDY

MATTAWAN EARLY ELEMENTARY (K-2), MATTAWAN, MICHIGAN**CLASSROOM PARTY/CELEBRATION**

At Mattawan Early Elementary School, it was tradition that on each student's birthday, the student was allowed to bring in birthday treats for the classroom and also deliver them personally to specialty teachers, school personnel, and the principal. Unfortunately, the tradition was taking time away from classroom instruction and the school staff's work day. "On some days, I would get up to 15 cupcakes!" said principal Derek Wheaton. In addition, many students had food allergies and it didn't seem fair that some students weren't able to enjoy the special treats with their classmates.

"The creation of our school Wellness Team along with all of the positive changes we have made, for both kids and adults, have had a tremendous effect and influence in our school. There is a huge health, nutrition, and wellness awareness that did not exist before. The programs and policy changes that we have implemented have been embraced by our staff for the betterment/benefit of everyone."

BETH PRINCIPE, INTEGRATED ARTS TEACHER, WELLNESS TEAM CO-CHAIR, MATTAWAN EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

In 2009, Wheaton decided to restructure the way celebration treats were handled in the classrooms. He did so in stages, beginning with education and encouragement rather than directives. "It was more of a movement," Wheaton explained. "Staff members on our School Improvement Team brought back ideas about birthday celebrations from the 2010 Eat Healthy + Play Hard = Smart Students Conference and were excited to implement them. During the second year of the new system, teachers saw more success and more signed on. It helped that the changes were encouraged, not mandated. It really bubbled up from the teachers who wanted to try it out."

The first step of the transition was to no longer allow children to travel out of the classroom to deliver birthday treats. This cut down on interruptions and minimized lost instructional time.

The next step was to encourage parents and teachers to provide healthier treats for all classroom celebrations and to encourage treat-free birthday celebrations. Parents received notifications at kindergarten roundup and through school newsletters. Now in the third year of the transition, in order to continue to educate and support parents, the school staff is creating a list of nutritious snack suggestions and will showcase examples of nutritious snacks at the fall school open house.

Eventually, treats will be completely eliminated during classroom birthday celebrations and instead, birthdays will be celebrated with non-food items and activities for the birthday girl or boy, such as a special chair, book, pencil or a special choice—the method of celebration is left to the discretion of each teacher.

With the adoption of the 2010 *Michigan Nutrition Standards*, Wheaton said all classrooms will celebrate birthdays treat-free. Teachers periodically complete a Zoomerang survey to gauge their attitudes and practices regarding classroom treats and snacks, food-as-reward, and physical activity opportunities in and outside the classroom. The most recent survey revealed that as of May 2011, over 80% of the classrooms no longer served birthday treats.

Currently, Wheaton said about half of all treats served at holiday celebrations are healthy choices. Looking to the future, Wheaton is planning to eliminate all holiday celebrations and instead, offer fall, winter, spring and year-end celebrations.

Overall, parents have been receptive to the changes and are following the guidelines the principal has set forth. If parents bring in treats that don't meet the guidelines, teachers explain the reasons for the change, focusing on increased instructional time and cost savings, and invite the parents to take the treats to the principal.

Wheaton feels that parent education is key. On a monthly basis, book bags filled with nutrition information and resources travel around the classroom and are shared with parents. In addition, Wheaton is considering creating a video about healthy food choices for students and parents. "What is most important is that we focus on the health of the child," he said.