



CASE STUDY

BUCHANAN ELEMENTARY (PRE-K – 5), GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

CLASSROOM PARTY/CELEBRATION

Up until three years ago, classroom celebrations of student birthdays often included cake at Buchanan Elementary School. Other than the food provided by parents, teachers paid out-of-pocket for all birthday celebration items including food, beverages, gifts and crafts. For many teachers, this expense increasingly became a financial burden.

When school nurse Madonna Saia suggested offering more nutritious options for classroom birthday celebrations, the Coordinated School Health Team (CSHT) took on the project and developed a plan to encourage teachers to make the change. “We’re all very committed to classroom wellness,” said Saia. The CSHT followed guidelines from their district’s wellness policy and their school’s food and beverage policy. They also looked to Michigan Action for Healthy Kids’ “Tips and Tools to Help Implement Michigan’s Healthy Food and Beverages Policy” for creative ways to celebrate birthdays in the classroom.

To encourage teachers to offer healthier food and beverage choices for birthday celebrations, teachers involved in the CSHT set an example by offering healthier options instead of cake. The options include: yogurt, yogurt smoothies, banana bread, fruit, popcorn, roasted chick peas, string cheese, whole grain crackers, 100% juice and water. “I feel better about offering healthier foods,” said Jeff DeJong, first grade teacher. “The students question why we don’t have the traditional cake, but they don’t complain about it.” Karen Blatchford, kindergarten teacher, adds, “The kids eat less sugar and they’re not so wound up. They love the fruit, so they still see it as a treat.”

Several of the teachers routinely celebrate birthdays without food. Instead, the students may sing songs, play games such as bingo or musical chairs, make crafts, and take photos. These teachers also provide the birthday student with a small gift such as a pencil or certificate. “I like the changes,” said Rita Paniccia, fourth grade teacher. “It’s sending a healthy, positive message. The students accept the change—they like any type of recognition or reward.”

“I like keeping celebrations food-free and low-key. Honestly, we need as much teaching time as possible. However, if a parent has a special request, I won’t deny them—it doesn’t happen that often.”

REBECCA DUNN, KINDERGARTEN TEACHER

After three years, the majority of teachers and parents are following the CSHT’s birthday celebration recommendations, and the CSHT will soon establish a school standard for birthday celebrations. Many teachers are more than happy to simplify classroom celebrations.

For schools interested in making this change, the CSHT recommends communicating with parents about the new birthday celebration policy at the beginning of the school year and asking for more school support in planning celebrations. “I like doing something different [with classroom celebrations],” said Carol Taylor, fifth grade teacher. “The parents liked trying something new, too.” Kindergarten teacher Karen Blatchford agrees, “Most parents are receptive and go along with it. Give it a try and you may be surprised at how well it’s received by all.”

