

# Rural Community Profiles: Schools

## Improving School Nutrition

Ajo, Arizona

When Fran Driver noticed her son was coming home hungry from kindergarten every day, she knew something needed to change. He wasn't just hungry – he was inattentive, and she knew he wasn't learning on an empty stomach. With only one cafeteria, the school served the youngest children lunch at 10:30 in the morning. They had no afternoon snack and were going home ravenous. As one of the few nurse practitioners in Ajo, Driver saw an opportunity to start changing the community's food culture, starting with the local public school.

By the time Driver's son entered first grade, the school had already begun changing its food policies and practices. New policies ensured that the youngest students received healthy afternoon snacks. And soon after implementing these policies, the school built a garden and began sending staff to the Edible Schoolyard Academy where they were trained to integrate garden activities into the school curriculum.

Eventually, the garden became integral to the school's curriculum. "Every kid in pre-K through 6th grade has a weekly session. Half the year we talk about nutrition; the other half is about math and science," Driver explained. The curriculum ensures that kids are receiving healthy meals at school and developing good eating habits at home. Driver reported parents' disbelief that their children were requesting fresh vegetables at home. **The cafeteria is now certified to serve food grown in the garden; this creates a visible garden-to-lunchroom link for the kids and community to see.**

The biggest success has been a drop in the student body's obesity rate, shrinking from 54 to 47 percent over the last six years.

The growth of the garden initiative was slow going. "In the beginning," Driver explained, "I got a lot of resistance. The teachers said, 'The kids won't respect it – they'll just throw the balls in the garden. It'll just be one more thing we have to do.'" But it didn't take long for traction to build. **"When teachers saw how excited the children got, that's when things really started to happen. They realized, 'The kids are learning stuff, they're having fun, and they're doing something healthy.'"**

Driver felt the garden wouldn't have happened without someone from the outside pushing it forward. "Teachers have all the regulations they have to meet already, and that was just too much work for them. But it's been a whole community effort. We've made food a cool thing."

### Strategies to improve school health in rural communities:



Create a culture of daily physical activity in schools



Provide school staff and leadership with nutrition and physical activity professional development

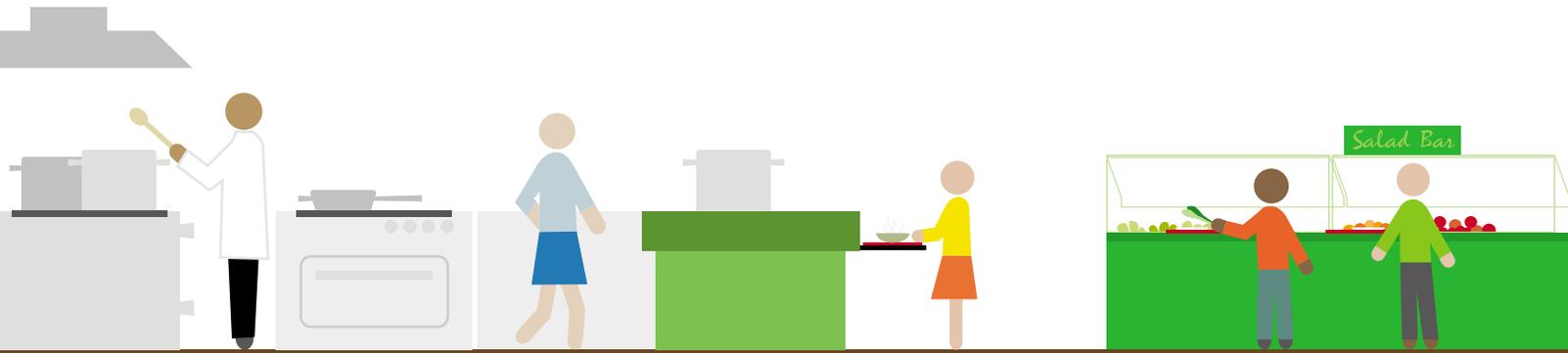


Improve nutritional quality of food served in cafeterias and around school



Create a school environment in and around schools that is conducive to physical activity





## Creating a Culture of Physical Activity

### Stanfield, Arizona

Principal Chris Lineberry joined Stanfield Elementary School in Stanfield, Arizona, with the firm belief that prioritizing the well-being of staff and students would improve the health of the community and the educational environment. Despite limited funding and scheduling restraints – challenges many schools face – the school community decided to put health at the center of the school day. Principal Lineberry explained, **“Kids’ needs drive our schedule. The schedule doesn’t drive the kids.”** Stanfield Elementary adapted the schedule to ensure kids get at least 30 minutes of physical activity per day and instituted a recess policy that allows teachers to break for recess when they see fit.

The school also tossed junk food and added more fruits and veggies to school meals, giving kids more choices. The administration partnered with food service contractors who backed their mission, ensured the parent organization sold fruit instead of candy, surveyed the kids regularly about their menu preferences, and started a school garden. Principal Lineberry noted, “The garden is an opportunity for kids to see you don’t have to be rich to eat well.” The changes have made a big difference. The teachers are absent 88 fewer days a year, and the school has received the highest distinction from the USDA’s Smarter Lunchrooms Certification initiative.

## The Kitchen Comes Back

### Petersburg, Alaska

Carlee Rae Wells was dismayed when she started her job as the Director of Child Nutrition with the city school district of Petersburg, Alaska. “I saw inferior food served. I didn’t want to eat that, and I wouldn’t have wanted my child to eat that. I felt like it was my civic duty to provide something to students that was nutritional and pleasing, and that they would appreciate. They would learn how to eat real food.”

The challenges were enormous. Petersburg is on an island; food travels via barge for three days or via airplane. And Wells had to get buy-in from the school community. **“I started to serve food that the staff could smell. With processed food, there isn’t a lot of cooking you can smell. But when you start cooking real food, the smell goes through the halls, and you start getting people interested.”**

The school district is eliminating processed food and adding salad bars. How? Wells gets on the phone with distributors, sends photos of the poor quality food they have received, and demands better products. The district also uses grants and funding from federal programs to buy new equipment and bring cooking back to school cafeterias.