

COOKING FOR A CAUSE

The Orleans/Niagara Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES)

MEDINA, N.Y.

It all started with lunch.

At a monthly luncheon of the Men's Cooking Class, an adult education program, the students decided they wanted to branch out and cook for others. Many were veterans of the U.S. military and knew that in their neighborhoods, community services for veterans were scarce. Helping veterans through the class's cooking and through raising community awareness about the needs of veterans seemed a natural choice.

The class's culminating event for veterans may have taken place on one day—July 5, 2013—but the efforts of this men's group continue to benefit the men, the veterans and their families, and the many other community groups that participated.

The cooking class was part of the Lockport Literacy Zone, which is run by the Continuing Education Adult Literacy Program of the Orleans/Niagara Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES). The program provides literacy instruction to more than 2,500 students a year. Anyone on public assistance must go to a Literacy Zone. These zones—located in impoverished neighborhoods throughout New York state—are one-stop centers where adults and their families can get educational services and referrals to social



service groups and agencies.

"It's a beautiful system," says Susan Diemert, literacy specialist for the continuing education program. "Once they get to us, they find they have the ability to move forward in their lives, and maybe even go to college. We bridge the gap between high school and college, getting students more prepared."

The Men's Cooking Class was an outgrowth of a women's group that was meeting at the Lockport center. The men also wanted to gather. One of them had been to culinary school, says Diemert. He began teaching them to "slice and dice, julienne vegetables, learn recipes, the whole gamut," she says. "Lots of them had never sat down at a table with their families and had polite conversation at meals."

The idea to cook for veterans sparked other community involvement and partnerships to raise awareness for the local veterans, who had few services in the area. A local foundation, Kids Breaking Free, which works with

children and families affected by substance abuse and other traumas, started a canned food drive. A local Mercedes-Benz dealer donated a passenger van so that veterans could be driven to medical appointments. Others volunteered to collect clothing and offer free haircuts to veterans.

"Our BOCES went through a strategic planning [process] and decided that our mission is to be the premier provider of innovative and effective solutions for the needs of our component districts and other learning collaboratives," says BOCES member Rebecca Albright. "If there's a problem, we want to be the first name on the Rolodex."

The BOCES serves 13 school districts in Orleans and Niagara counties as an umbrella services organization for the schools. Members of the BOCES are appointed by the participating districts. Some, like Albright, also served on their district's school board.

"The best part of the initiative was that it came together from entities



2014 **magna** awards

Grand
Prize Winner,
under 5,000
enrollment

CONTACT

Susan Diemert
Literacy Specialist
sdiemert@onboces.org
www.onboces.org

in the community that saw how they could learn and share through the collaboration,” says Albright. “There were no services for veterans; this was a tremendous need. The whole heart and beauty of this was that it brought people together who never would have thought to reach out.”

The Men’s Cooking Class hosted the July event at the Lockport Elks Club. The men prepared salads and grilled food for veterans and their families. Children from Kids Breaking Free handed out bags of groceries to families, as well. The family event included a basket raffle and bounce house for children. They raised \$20,000 in cash and \$60,000 in donated services. The community groups and organizations involved now are working to open a shelter for homeless veterans.

CONTACT

Frederick Treuting
Administrator of
Student Services and
the Arts
ftreuting@stcharles.k12.la.us
www.stcharles.k12.la.us

Diemert says that the event will continue, and she’s fielding questions about starting another Men’s Cooking Class. What of the men in the first class? She says many are now working in area restaurants and looking for opportunities to continue their education in the culinary field.

With 13 members, the BOCES operates with a large group of decision-makers. However, Albright says, “We get along. It’s not hard to get 13 people on the same page when they have the same concept in their heart when they walk in the door. We make decisions that we feel are in the best interests of everybody.”

The community collaboration that began with the Men’s Cooking Class will continue, Albright says. “When we need something, we pick up the phone and ask. You are working with kids and adults, and those two groups are working with veterans. How much worthier a cause can you get?”

ARTS AWARENESS FESTIVAL

St. Charles Parish
Public Schools

LULING, LA.

The Mississippi River runs through St. Charles Parish Public Schools. The community is about 20 miles from New

2014 **magna** awards

Grand Prize
Winner, 5,000
to 20,000
enrollment



Orleans, so it's no surprise that the fabled New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival was the inspiration for the district's Arts Awareness Festival.

Now in its fifth year, the one-day festival, usually held at the end of March, showcases the district's theater, music, dance, and visual arts. Like the Jazz Festival, it features multiple stages with performances going on simultaneously. "The showcase and venue are unique," says Frederick Treuting, administrator of student services and the arts for St. Charles. People can move from stage to stage, enjoying all the performances.

Treuting, a former high school band and choral director, says the festival started out of a desire to make sure that the arts do not get lost in the push for standardized testing and academic achievement. "How can we make everyone more aware of the value of the arts?" he asks. "Showcase it."

For the St. Charles school board, the festival is an important way to build support among parents and the community for the district's arts programs.

"This program is about awareness," says school board President John "Jay" Robichaux. "The building block of education is the arts, whether its music, drama, or visual arts. We put this program on to keep the public aware of what we offer."

Students in kindergarten through 12th grade participate in the festival. The performing arts are represented—band, choir, theater, dance—as are the visual arts. The goal, Treuting says, is to get the public to not only see the performance or the final product, but also understand what goes on behind it for the students.

For example, during the festival, students set up studios and work on art projects in front of the audience. "We encourage the public to speak to them and ask questions," says Treuting. "What inspired you? It's a dialogue

between artists and public."

At the same time, he says, teachers help festival-goers create their own arts through craft activities. In another area, theater groups are engaging in improv and encouraging the audience to help them create a scene. "We try to get the public to understand that everyone can engage in art," he says.

A standing arts committee is in charge of the festival, with Treuting at its head. He is close to meeting his goal of having all 18 district schools participate. Last year, more than 1,200 participants and guests attended the festival, which has a budget of \$5,000. It's held at the district's professional learning center and it fills the building as well as some tents on the grounds. "We almost have outgrown the space we have," says Robichaux.

The success of the festival mirrors the importance that the board places on earning community trust. "Our motto is: Every child, every day," Robichaux says. "We take care of what we need to do in the classroom. It starts with a board that focuses on educating children. We promise our constituents that we will spend their dollars the right way. We don't shut them out. When you concentrate on every child, every day, and do things the right way, people respect that."

The festival has been successful since Day One, says St. Charles school board member and past president Clarence "Sonny" Savoie.

"It is about the whole child and being successful in life, says Savoie. "That is what you're building besides academics. The arts festival gives people an opportunity to see what their children are doing. Rick is a musician; he knows how important the arts are. They make for a better person and a better child. You have a good culture in south Louisiana; it manifests itself at the Arts Festival."



Grand Prize Winner, over 20,000 enrollment

CONTACT

Faith Sisley
Communication Specialist
faith.sisley@kent.k12.wa.us
www.kent.k12.wa.us

iGRAD: INDIVIDUALIZED GRADUATION AND DIPLOMA PROGRAM

Kent School District

KENT, WASH.

Kent Superintendent Edward Lee Vargas stopped at a gas station recently, where a young man told him he used to attend one of the district high schools, but he'd dropped out. Vargas asked him: Why? The school was too big, the young man answered. "There were too many distractions. Things moved too slowly. I stopped coming, and no one ever called me."





Debbie Straus
school board
President

Carol Cleveland
principal of
iGrad

However, he'd heard from a friend about iGrad, Kent's program to bring dropouts back to school. There, he said, "I can work at my own pace."

That, says Vargas, is "a powerful testimonial on why we need in education to adapt our services to our students."

The Individualized Graduation and Diploma Program (iGrad) is a partnership between Kent and nearby Green River Community College, which brings 16- to 21-year-olds back to school and helps them earn high school diplomas, GEDs, college credits, or professional certification.

Located in a shopping center, iGrad works to remove the barriers to returning to school. The schedule is flexible—students can attend in three-hour blocks in the morning, afternoon, or evening. Each student has an individualized learning plan.

The choice of a space was important, Vargas says. The district wanted a location that was accessible by public

transportation, and the space had to look more like a community college than a high school.

Teachers use past grades, school records, and diagnostic tests to customize a plan for each student. Classes are blended with online (through Kent's online high school) and individualized instruction. Teachers work on site with small groups of students or individuals.

The students also complete work outside the classroom during the week. Students receive wireless-enabled laptops so they can access the content when their schedules allow. "A lot of part-time people come in as needed," says Vargas. "They're not bound by a seat time schedule."

When iGrad started in 2012, it opened with 225 students. Enrollment has nearly doubled since then, causing the district to expand into a larger space at the shopping center. So far, 92 students have earned credentials with 18 diplomas, 73 GEDs, and one technical

certificate.

Initially, the district recruited for the program by sending postcards to the last known address of students no longer attending school, and through newspaper advertisements. Word of mouth, however, has been the most effective recruiting tool.

A confluence of events put the program in place. The Kent school board crafted a strategic plan, with high student achievement as one of its seven goals.

At the same time, the Washington State Legislature passed House Bill 1418—the legislation known as "Open Doors." It encourages school districts to partner with community colleges to help provide educational services to drop-outs, and it gives flexibility for districts to use state funding for those services.

The legislation, says school board President Debbie Straus, "allowed us to reach out to all students. We knew that we were missing students with traditional schools." The board invested \$250,000 in iGrad to get it up and running.

Kent was the first district in the state to take advantage of the new legislation. It was able to build on the strength of its already existing programs, strong technology infrastructure, and community partnerships, particularly with Green River Community College. Students can take community college classes through iGrad free of charge, and even earn an associate degree.

The program also is helping district officials figure out the best way to keep students in school, before they become dropouts. They are heeding the lessons from iGrad students about why they dropped out in the first place.

"We are learning from students to put things in place at the school level," says Straus. "Part of our responsibility is to help them."

Kathleen Vail (kvail@nsba.org) is editor-in-chief of American School Board Journal.