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FRESH FOOD EXPLORERS – REAL FOOD FOR KIDS

Plant-based educators in Arlington, Virginia, increase preschoolers' enthusiasm for vegetables

Arlington, VA: Grant-making nonprofit [VegFund](#) is supporting a first-of-its-kind plant-based program in [Arlington Public Schools](#) (APS) called [Fresh Food Explorers](#) (FFE). Created by [Real Food for Kids](#) with a grant from VegFund, FFE aims to increase the access to and consumption of fresh vegetables among preschoolers, including those in low-income communities who are at risk of developing health problems due to their diets.



Photo credit: DCCK/Hadley Chittum

Real Food for Kids advocates for positive changes to school food policies. Aligning their goals with those of schools and multiple stakeholders, they've generated institutionalized support for increases in whole-food, plant-based school food as a critical component of children's wellness and academic success.

Together with an organization called [Healthy Community Action Team Arlington](#) (HCAT), Real Food for Kids developed **Fresh Food Explorers**. The program is an eight-week nutrition course piloted in 2019

at Carlin Springs Elementary School, where 85% of students qualify for free or reduced lunches. The research-based curriculum was customized for its young audience with feedback from preschool educators.

We're seeing these kids at a very early age to see if we can impart some fun to this, really get them engaged in the idea of eating vegetables.

~ Mary Porter, Director of Programs at Real Food for Kids

In-class lessons engage students' fine motor skills and senses in hands-on activities such as sorting vegetables into a rainbow arrangement. Children get to hold, smell, and taste a variety of vegetables and combine them in a finished dish, such as fresh salsa or gazpacho, that they then get to enjoy! The lessons often highlight and explore an ingredient found in the school lunch menu for the day, sparking students' curiosity to try a vegetable in the cafeteria line that they might otherwise skip. Furthermore, students take home simple recipes that their families can try together.

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The students loved when Fresh Food Explorers came every week. They would get so excited to participate in the lessons, raise their hands, and contribute their ideas. The most powerful thing was for some of the more hesitant students to be influenced by their friends' enthusiasm for vegetables and eventually try tiny nibbles for themselves. Parents said their children talked about the lessons and asked to eat the vegetables at home!

~ Ellen Vicens, Preschool Teacher

The in-class program began with 60 students in 2019. They completed two rounds of the course before COVID shutdowns began.

We really wanted this program to go on. I always think that necessity is the mother of learning. And in preparing to go virtual, we created Mr. Broccoli, the puppet who stars in our video series. Mr. Broccoli is spectacular. He's a very big celebrity!

~ Bonnie Moore, Executive Director of Real Food for Kids

In the spring of 2021, the online learning version of the program was made available to 700+ students enrolled in APS preschool classrooms. The online activities reinforce food literacy through professionally produced video lessons featuring Coco, a "vegetable enthusiast," and beloved puppet Mr. Broccoli. Parents receive materials to support increased vegetable consumption at home, including a downloadable coloring book.



Photo credit: DCCK/Hadley Chittum



Photo credit: Real Food for Kids

Real Food for Kids has also launched a **Chef Exchange**, which pairs a school nutrition professional with a chef from the restaurant industry to collaborate on appealing plant-based recipes for school food menus and family meals.

This unique collaboration is designed to foster innovation in school meals and share best practices from different yet aligned production industries. Collaborators produce their new recipes in both large-scale (for school and restaurant kitchens) and small-scale (for school families). Engaging "harvest videos" encourage healthy plant-based cuisine in schools, restaurants, and home environments.

~ Bonnie Moore, Executive Director of Real Food for Kids

The Reverend Thomas Bowen, Interim Director of the Washington, DC, mayor's office, attended the launch of the Chef Exchange program, which was also attended by a human-sized Mr. Broccoli! The support from public schools, local chefs, and the mayor bodes well for the plant-based movement.

The Fresh Food Explorers program is exciting because it engages a comprehensive group of stakeholders including school administrators, families, and restaurants who are working together to mainstream the adoption of plant-based food in schools.

~ Leslie Barcus, Executive Director, VegFund

Funding programs like Fresh Food for Kids is a unique opportunity for us as a small grant-making organization to have a big impact. It's one example of many for institutional buy-in of plant-based foods, and it's scalable!

~ Leah, Gage, Programs Manager, VegFund

If you would like to help VegFund support more programs like Fresh Food Explorers, please contact Leslie Barcus, Executive Director at leslie@vegfund.org.

About VegFund: Founded in 2009, VegFund is a nonprofit that empowers vegan advocates by funding effective vegan outreach that inspires people to choose and maintain a vegan life. Our most popular grantee activities include food sampling, film screenings, vegfests and health fairs, conferences, learning events, vegan challenges, and online campaigns. VegFund also develops and curates the very best resources available on effective advocacy and facilitates information sharing among activists in the vegan community.

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Note to editors: VegFund logo can be found at <https://vegfund.org/press>
For photos (including high-resolution images), please contact [Kari Hallenburg](#)