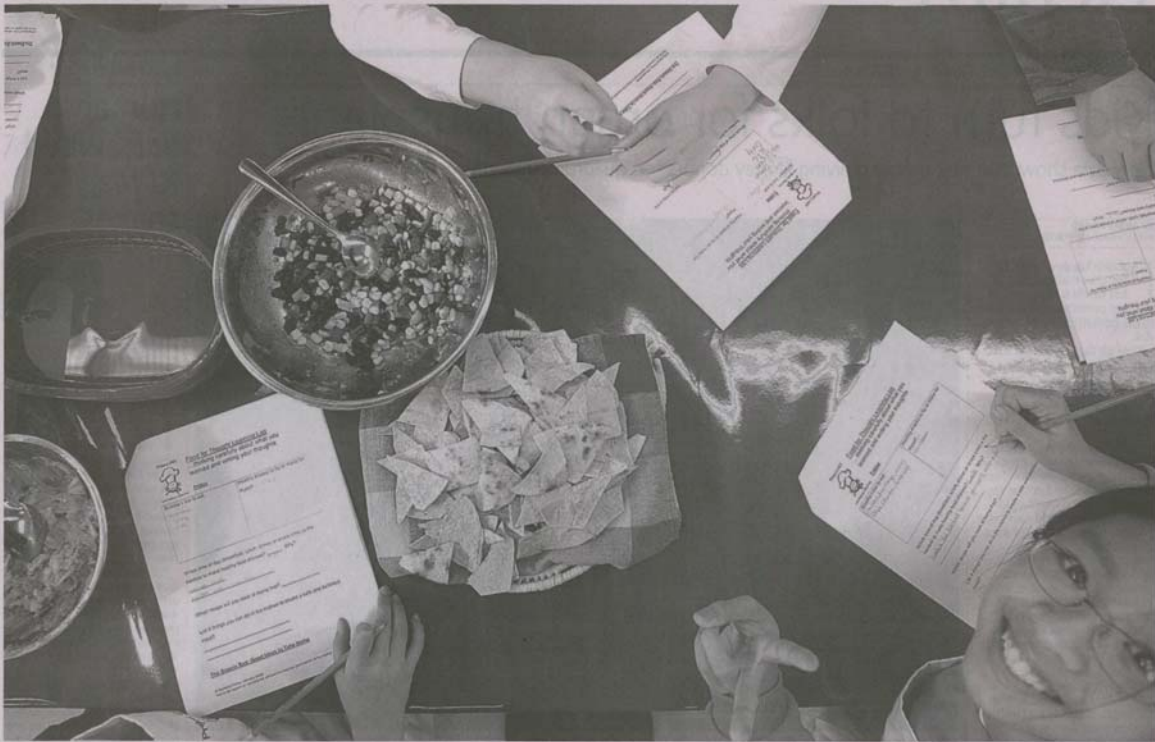


COOKING CURRICULUM || PROJECT CHEF



## Healthy eating – it's elementary

This month, the Vancouver School Board launched an experimental program that uses cooking to teach kids everything from nutrition to science and language arts

BY FIONA MORROW VANCOUVER

**W**hat are the snacks you like to eat?" asks Barb Finley of a class of 9- to 11-year-olds at Vancouver's William Osler Elementary School. The responses are, predictably, set squarely in the chips and chocolate camp.

"What about healthy snacks?" Ms. Finley counters. Thirty sets of shoulders shrug in unison.

Ms. Finley smiles. This is exactly the challenge she relishes. A teacher turned chef, Ms. Finley is heading an experimental school program with the Vancouver School Board called Project CHEF, which teaches students in Grades 4 and 5 about healthy eating and nutrition, and shows them how to prepare and cook a range of dishes. The privately funded project was piloted in one school in conjunction with the school board last fall, and earlier this month they began a rollout to nine more Vancouver schools.

Research has found that children's eating habits are formed by the time they reach 12, and that seven out of 10 Canadian children do not eat enough fruit and vegetables daily.

Project CHEF teaches one dish a day and is structured to include every meal - breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks - with a menu of fruit salad, porridge, minestrone soup, vegetable and tofu stir fry, and healthy snacks.

Ms. Finley and her two assistants spend one week in each school, working with two groups of around 30 students who attend morning or afternoon sessions each day.

A teacher for over 25 years, Ms. Finley went back to school herself in 2001 and trained as a chef. She began teaching cooking classes in private schools, before deciding to direct her energies toward children from all family income brackets.

She concentrated on integrating her ideas about food and nutrition with the school curriculum before taking her plan to the Vancouver School Board.

"I tried to develop a program that tackles what needs to be taught in the classroom," she says. "I tied it into three of the B.C. Ministry of Education integrated-resource packages - science, health and career, and language arts - so that it fulfills the prescribed learning outcomes as laid out in the curriculum."

Health and career goals include learning about healthy living along with safety and injury prevention - while reading recipes, viewing demonstrations and using language for the purpose of contributing to a class goal fit the language-arts mandate.

Ms. Finley also discusses the benefits of buying and eating locally, which covers the science curriculum's aim of understanding how people use British Columbia's resources.

"I believe you can cover almost any subject while in a kitchen cooking," she said.

"When Barb first approached me, I thought it was a very good idea and it was a good fit for our curriculum goals," said Valerie Overgaard, VSB associate superintendent of learning services. "The issues were logistical and financial: We needed to find out how best it could be implemented, and then it would be contingent on funding."

Right now, the program is funded by the Chefs' Table Society of B.C., a startup grant from Les Dames d'Escoffier and other charitable donations. In-kind help has come from Sunrise Soya Foods and Discovery Organics.

Ms. Finley says she spends as much time hunting down grant money as she does teaching the children. So far, there is money for one week in each of the nine schools this spring, and a week-long program in 10 more schools in the fall, by which time 1,200 students will have been involved. Ms. Finley hopes to continue the program into 2009.

Unlike the recent government initiative in Britain to introduce cooking into all schools, there is currently no direct financial support available for this program. Nevertheless, the school board has donated learning materials and provided teachers with planning time.

"They have been incredibly generous," Ms. Finley said.

"They gave all 18 teachers involved leave to attend a professional day with me so that we could really examine the concepts of the program."

The week culminates with snack day. Bottles of pop, bags of chips and frozen pizza boxes are scrutinized and their ingredients read out and discussed.

"Do you know what everything listed on the package is?" asks Ms. Finley. "Then why would you put it inside your body?"

Today they are making corn and black bean salsa, guacamole and dry-toasted whole-wheat tortilla chips. Every ingredient is discussed with reference to Canada's Food Guide before small hands enthusiastically grate garlic, chop onions and squeeze limes.

A Grade 5 boy who earlier listed his favourite snacks as a litany of fast food takeout remarks that this week he ate fruit salad for the first time.

"We don't have that much fruit at home," he says. "If we cook, it's usually rice fried with eggs."

So far, though, he loves everything he's tried, and today he scoops every last bit of salsa left in the bowl.

"The first day I tell them they have to have an open mind and an open mouth," Ms. Finley said. "It's just great to see students trying foods they've never tasted before and really enjoying them."

ABOVE Gigi Lai, 10, learns to cook as part of the Vancouver School Board's experimental program, Project CHEF, at William Osler Elementary School.

BOTTOM LEFT Barb Finley, who heads Project CHEF, teaches cooking skills to elementary students at William Osler.

BOTTOM RIGHT Students Victoria Nguyen, 12, Hilary Lo, 11, and Adam Hwong, 10, hone their cooking skills. PHOTOS BY LAURALEYSHON FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL.

**I believe you can cover almost any subject while in a kitchen cooking.**

Barb Finley, teacher



**Project CHEF**  
Globe and Mail, L5  
February 29, 2008