

New West Oakland kitchen to prepare fresh meals for district

By **Jill Tucker** | October 10, 2015 | Updated: October 11, 2015 11:37am

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Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

From left, Ciara Simpson, 8, Leah Seymore, 7, Jordan Hargrove, 8, and Saeed Shariff, 8, eat lunch together at Lafayette Elementary School in Oakland.

The elementary school students who lined up for lunch Friday peered down at their two

entree choices — macaroni and cheese or a barbecue chicken sandwich — but found it hard to tell the difference. Both were in identical paper trays covered in plastic, condensation concealing the food inside.

While the meals were scratch-made at one of Oakland Unified’s two kitchens, and contained healthy and whole-grain ingredients, they looked more like something off a convenience store counter. Lafayette Elementary first-grader Anthony Cole picked up the sandwich, but wrinkled his nose and shook his head when asked about the drippy plastic cover.

“It’s too hard to open,” the 6-year-old said.

District officials want to offer something different, completely revamping how food is served in Oakland schools, starting with a new \$40 million central kitchen in West Oakland — one with a demonstration farm on-site and instructional areas to introduce students to the concepts of culinary arts and hospitality. Also: little to no plastic wrap.

The location of the kitchen, at the former Marcus Foster Middle School on West Street, has stirred up some opposition from neighbors. But the project puts Oakland on trend with districts across the state and country working to provide healthier, locally sourced, appetizing and cost-effective meals. Throw in the farm and classrooms,



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and the city is setting itself apart, district officials said.

Family style

The central kitchen, in the final phases of approval, would bring school lunches full circle, back to the days when meals were prepared locally and served family-style from a food line rather than made off-site — sometimes thousands of miles away — before being packaged, frozen or refrigerated, then trucked in and reheated.

For parent and West Oakland neighbor Renia Webb, who has three kids in city schools, the district can't build the new facility fast enough.



“My kids have never eaten school lunch,” she said. “I just couldn’t do it. It looks disgusting.”

That’s not what district officials want to hear. They say parents don’t trust that the current meals are sourced and made locally, because they are wrapped in plastic. “So much is in the perception of what is in that container,” said Jennifer LeBarre, director of nutrition services.

The new kitchen will turn out similar meals, like Kung Pao chicken, but send the cooked rice and ingredients to campuses in bulk, to be served on trays, the smell wafting through the halls. Currently, kids can't smell the food through the plastic.

"Students eat with their nose, and their eyes and mouth," LeBarre said. "You'll be able to smell the food being cooked."

The nutrition director is even more excited about the farm, bringing students in to see where food comes from and how it's prepared.

"So many of our students are disconnected from the food. They don't understand where it comes from," she said. "They need to see how a peach was grown on a tree."



Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

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Ryan Woods, 8, left, and Andre Tule-De La Cruz, 6, both reach for the last mac and cheese during lunchtime at Lafayette Elementary School in Oakland.

LeBarre was at Lafayette when Anthony and others at the school grabbed the barbecue chicken or the mac and cheese, and she watched as many of the meals went untouched, while a handful of children ate fast food meals delivered by their parents.

“It’s hard to compete with that,” she said quietly.

Serving healthy food — and getting kids to eat it — is a big job in Oakland schools, where 3 out of 4 of the district’s 38,000 students are low-income, qualifying for a free or reduced-price lunch. At some campuses, children get most if not all of their nutrition at school, eating breakfast, lunch, dinner and two snacks each day, said Troy Flint, a district spokesman.

“We have more opportunity than any other institution to change kids’ relation with food and provide for their health,” he said. “That’s an awesome responsibility and a great opportunity.”

Building begins in 2016

It’s also a challenge, as school districts get a little more than \$3 in federal reimbursement for each school lunch served, and even less for breakfast and snacks.

The new Oakland site will be staffed and run by the district, employing 200 to 300 workers, while the construction will be funded by Measure J bond money approved by voters in 2012. The district is in the final stages of environmental review for the project and, if all goes according to plan, construction will begin next year, with the kitchen completed in 2018.

Webb lives across from the proposed site. Not all her neighbors support the plan, though, which requires the demolition of the school.

The project would strip West Oakland of a school site, though the property hasn't been used as a school in years. Some neighborhood critics say they don't like the idea of trucks coming and going, or a factory-like building replacing the classrooms where they or their parents went to school.

Controversy over site

The school was named after Marcus Foster, Oakland's first African American superintendent, who was assassinated in 1973 by the Symbionese Liberation Army.



Photo: Leah Millis, The Chronicle

Tyran Ross, 7, digs into a pear, his favorite fruit packed from home, during lunchtime at Lafayette Elementary School in Oakland.

“My hope is that the district would understand that and not just blow through and say we're doing what we want to do,” said Gail Kennard, whose father was the architect who designed the school. “It's kind of a slap in the face to the community.”

But Oakland Unified officials say it's the only district-owned site that can house the kitchen, which was identified and publicly vetted years ago during the Measure J bond campaign.

"We're not looking at any other options," Flint said.

Webb said she respects those who have concerns but believes much of the community is behind the project. The benefits of better food in schools far outweigh the negatives, Webb said, adding that she is tired of watching children around her eat chips and soda all day.

"If we instill in these kids from elementary school what it means to eat nutritious foods they'll grow up with that mind-set," Webb said. "We need to change the way this generation is feeling about food."

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