



SPOTLIGHT ON EQUITY – ALDINE ISD

The Aldine Independent School District (AISD) is a public-school district which serves portions of Houston and unincorporated Harris County. In the school year 2020-21, they had a total of 63, 313 students enrolled whose demographics were Hispanic/Latino/x (75%) and Black/African American (21%), Asian, White and students of more than one race (< 2%).

The Aldine ISD believes that gaining perspectives from people of diverse backgrounds and communities is critical to building a collective vision for student success that celebrates culture. To more adequately represent the neighborhoods served by the district, efforts have been made to hire more staff members who are Hispanic/Latino/x. The district noticed that current employees who speak Spanish connect well with their students who are monolingual Spanish speakers. To create more opportunities to better serve students, district leaders recognized a need to employ more individuals that speak Spanish.

“The students feel more comfortable with adults who they can talk to in their native tongues, it makes a difference.”

Susan D’Amico, FNS Director

Family and Community Engagement

Gradual changes are being made to support all families in the community. *Family and Community Engagement (FACE)* was created as a way to connect authentically with families. Child Nutrition has assisted this effort by teaching a class for parents in English and Spanish called “Free and Reduced Meal Benefits/Servicios de Nutricion de Aldine y los beneficios del programa de comidas a precios reducidos o gratuitos” which teaches parents and guardians about Free and Reduced priced applications and benefits, such as Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT). Child Nutrition has also conducted a bilingual class on the USDA meal patterns and the nutritional value of various foods. These classes were created specifically for parents and guardians in the community. Currently, Child Nutrition is working on a cooking class at the request of the FACE parents. It will be taught by the Child Nutrition Chef who will be assisted by a Spanish-speaking translator. A traditional Latino recipe will be converted to meet USDA guidelines for sodium, fat, and sugar.

Learning Opportunities

Aldine ISD opened a new school this year called “La Promesa” (The Promise) that provides new immigrants with global, career, and academic competencies needed to decide their future path as high school graduates. Students acquire language in an environment that not only addresses their academic needs but also their social-emotional needs.

Many opportunities for growth exist when centering equity. Cultural misunderstanding, which are inevitable, can open the door for more nuanced conversations about differences. For example, as more bilingual Spanish speaking employees have joined the AISD team other employees who are non-Spanish speaking have felt left out of those conversations. This has created a learning opportunity to talk about what it means to be bilingual and has opened the door to share differences among staff from varying backgrounds.

Cooking contests have been used for kitchen team building but also for student enrichment. Last year, cafeteria staff competed in a salsa contest after the department saw success with a student “Iron Chef” competition co-hosted by high schools’ Culinary teachers in the Child Nutrition building. The cooking competitions with taste testing highlight the importance of cooking and eating well. The students have also participated in cooking competitions with taste testing to highlight the importance of cooking and eating well.

Child Nutrition has a full time Dietitian and a Nutritionist. The Nutritionist focuses on student nutrition education as well as marketing healthy meals. It is important to Child Nutrition to involve the kids with menu via surveys and taste testing events. They want them to be aware of opportunities to improve their health such as attending the School Health Advisory Committee meetings. Each event students attend teaches them more about what Child Nutrition does each day and to see possible careers for themselves in the future. Taste tests or menu surveys also give students a chance to share their opinions and feel like they have been heard.

Students can help with many things that we don’t generally consider. In a previous district, D’Amico recruited a high school class to assist with design decisions for a large cafeteria renovation. The students were very proud when it was completed. If possible, Child Nutrition would like to include students in a similar process again in Aldine.

Aldine ISD has a large vegetable and fruit garden behind its central office building. During the fall of 2021, Child Nutrition (CN) collaborated with the Future Farmers of America (FFA) director at one of the high schools to work on the garden. CN hopes to collaborate with this same teacher to help them buy seeds and dirt for their own garden at the high school. CN plans to accompany the growth of their garden with Nutrition education taught by the Nutritionist.

So far this school year, three taste tests have been conducted and two more are on the calendar. At first, CN hesitated to do so, but once COVID rates decreased they could do it. One thing that was very helpful in Aldine ISD is that the district paid \$500 to all employees who were fully vaccinated. Many vaccination events have also been conducted for students and staff. In addition, a mask mandate has been in effect all school year.



Learn Grow Cook

One program offered to students is called *Learn Grow Cook*. The Hands-on course teaches kids about nutrition and how food is grown, using the school garden and culinary kitchen elementary students are given seeds to plant; once the vegetables have grown, the students harvest them and help prep vegetables that a Chef prepares for them. They learn about the nutrients in these foods as they sit together. This program has been a big hit and is fully booked every year.

Promising Practices

Below is a list of practices that Aldine has advanced to promote inclusion among students and families. Investment in these areas has made a positive impact on the community.

- **Representation** – efforts are underway to hire a diverse workforce that mirrors the community demographic to make it easier for students to see themselves in their leaders.
- **Bilingual translators** – providing bilingual personnel to support staff members whose first language is not English has been crucial as new employees learn their roles.
- **Translators**- make sure that messages on the outside marquee are translated into Spanish, as well as any information sent home to parents. It is important to the community and essential for providing information to families.
- **Cultural humility** – seizing opportunities of misunderstanding to think about cultures other than your own and to reflect on your own internal biases. Ask yourself, “Why would I feel uncomfortable by hearing a language other than my own being spoken?”
- **Authentic relationships** – building authentic connections by reaching out to families within their community and getting to know them in sincere ways.
- **Partnerships** – Aldine leaders have worked with other trusted organizations such as the FFA, Lone Star College, Texas Children’s Hospital, and other local businesses and organizations. Creating partnerships helps to provide more resources to students and families.
- **Culturally appropriate foods** – Aldine has a dietitian to plan the school meals and she strives to incorporate different cultural foods into the menus.

