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Contact: Madeleine Saxler, Communications Intern
School District 197 – West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan
651.403.7022 - office
Madeleine.Saxler@isd197.org

Food grant allows district first-graders to try new healthy foods

(Mendota Heights, Minn.) --- Dakota Country has awarded a grant to every elementary school in the West St. Paul – Mendota Heights – Eagan school district to encourage including a variety of fruits and vegetables in the diets of first graders. Funding is provided by the Minnesota Department of Health through the Statewide Health Improvement Program (SHIP).



Starting at the beginning of February, first-graders have an opportunity each week taste a less common fruit or vegetable chosen by a registered dietician. The students learn about the new food, taste it, and then rate how they think it tastes. They also get a sticker to take home to help trigger a discussion with their parents about the food they sampled, as well as other healthy foods.

So far this month, students have eagerly tried kiwi, jicama, and star fruit and have generally had positive reactions to the new fruits. They will soon be trying plantains, mangos, pomegranates, and kumquats. This presents an opportunity for students to discover healthy eating options, hopefully developing good habits that will continue as they grow.

Julie Lyford, parent of a Somerset first grader, is very thankful for the new introductions. “Madi, my picky eater, came home all excited about Kiwi,” says Lyford. “This does a great job of giving them new things to enjoy.”

To reinforce the message about eating healthy foods, parents are encouraged to include vegetables and fruit in the lunches and snacks that they send with their students instead of less healthy alternatives such as chips and candy. When possible, foods that received favorable ratings among the students will be included in school lunch menus.



“The goal is to make an environmental change within our school district,” says Stacie O’Leary, Health Services Coordinator for Independent School District 197. “We want our kids to be able to try something new and take something positive out of that experience.”

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