WHEN ARE WE GOING TO TEACH HEALTH?

LET'S TEACH HEALTH AS IF EACH CHILD'S LIFE DEPENDS ON IT—BECAUSE IT DOES

DUNCAN VAN DUSEN
CONTENTS

PART I: WHY?
1. WHAT THIS BOOK IS (AND WHAT IT ISN’T) ........................................... 15
2. PUBLIC EDUCATION AND PUBLIC HEALTH ........................................... 23
   CASE STUDY: LAWMAKERS IN ACTION ............................................... 29
3. HEALTHY KIDS LEARN BETTER................................................................. 35
   CASE STUDY: PRINCIPAL IN ACTION ....................................................... 47
4. BARRIERS TO TEACHING HEALTH ........................................................... 55

PART II: WHAT?
5. THE RECIPE FOR EFFECTIVE HEALTH EDUCATION .............................. 63
   CASE STUDY: PARENTS IN ACTION .......................................................... 81
6. SCHOOL CULTURE: KIDS VALUE WHAT WE DO, NOT WHAT WE SAY ...... 91
   CASE STUDY: DISTRICT IN ACTION ........................................................ 105
   ACTIVITY BREAK ...................................................................................... 117

PART III: HOW?
7. TOBACCO AVOIDANCE: DEFUSING THE E-CIGARETTE EXPLOSION ...... 121
   CASE STUDY: STUDENT IN ACTION ......................................................... 139
8. PHYSICAL ACTIVITY: MAXIMIZING THE TIME WE ALREADY HAVE ........ 147
   CASE STUDY: TEACHERS IN ACTION ....................................................... 161
9. CELEBRATING NUTRITION: INVOLVING EVERYONE IS FREE AND FUN ... 167
   CASE STUDY: FOOD SERVICE IN ACTION .............................................. 179
10. CATCH®: DOING GOOD, SCALING GREAT ............................................... 189

PART IV: WHEN?
11. “WHEN AM I GOING TO USE THIS?” ..................................................... 203

APPENDIX
SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED ACTIONS BY ACTOR .................................... 211
GLOSSARY ....................................................................................................... 217
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .................................................................................... 221
ABOUT THE AUTHOR ................................................................................... 223
NOTES & SOURCES FOR FURTHER READING ............................................. 225
CASE STUDY

Food Service in Action—Altus
Public Schools, Altus, Oklahoma

The food service team in a rural district leads an all-hands effort to deliver meals to students during COVID-19 school closures.

The town of Altus sits in the southwest corner of Oklahoma and is rural, remote, and prone to extreme summer heat, reaching temperatures as high as 120 degrees. With flat topography, its every road runs as a north-south or east-west gridline. After hitting a high of 23,302 residents in 1970, Altus’ population has declined by 20 percent over the past five decades. And, as of the 2010 census, 23 percent of Altus’ children under 18 lived below the federal poverty line. These demographics paint Altus as a textbook example of the economic and social hardships that have hit rural America over the past 50 years. But the community boasts a tough, proud cohesion and a sense of discipline inspired, perhaps, by the nearby Air Force base.
On the afternoon of March 12, 2020, Altus Public Schools’ Superintendent, Roe Worbes, came into the office of the district’s Director of Child Nutrition, Sabina Garrett. He informed her that the next day, its schools would be closing due to the coronavirus outbreak, with no reopening date in sight. “What can we do to keep our 3,500 kids fed?” he asked. Garrett worked into the night drafting a plan—and Operation Bulldog Thunder was born.

**Operation Bulldog Thunder**

This program offered 10 free meals per week (breakfast and lunch, Monday through Friday) for 10 weeks to all residents of Altus age 18 and under, plus disabled kids up to age 21. After its rollout on March 23, it provided a total of 129,794 meals to students—an average of 2,600 each weekday.

All the food was prepared in the kitchen of Altus High School (home of the Bulldogs), by eight to ten district staff cooks working full time in eight-day shifts starting at 6:00 each morning. Volunteers bagged the food for delivery via six district school buses, which brought it to 21 stops throughout the city; cars served outlying areas. When buses arrived with food, they were often met by lines of hungry children stretching for blocks.
Garrett describes how, as the planning started, she quickly realized that this effort was analogous to a military deployment (thus requiring an appropriately-sounding name). So she called on her experience from years in the service, organizing the work into four categories: funding, food supply, labor, and communications. Before the details were final, Superintendent Worbes asked her to start making the arrangements for buying and cooking the food; he would ensure that the school district funded the program.

It did. At first, the district tapped funds from the USDA’s Seamless Summer Option, an emergency food program it had used previously during a period of teacher strikes. To obtain more reimbursement and flexibility
in menu planning, it quickly switched to another USDA program, Summer Food Service, which has ended up covering most of the cost of the operation. In order to provide extra whole grains and fresh fruits and vegetables in their meals, Altus Public Schools also tapped the USDA’s Commodity Supplemental Food Program and its Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program, along with accepting contributions from the community. In all, they received more than $21,000 in funding, including $10,000 in a single check—which brought Garrett to tears.

Even with money to buy the food, obtaining it was not easy. District vendors faced supply-chain disruptions and overwhelming demand as people fearfully stockpiled groceries. Garrett was on the phone with suppliers at all hours to ensure deliveries to run the program and worked especially hard to secure fresh produce.

People power turned out to be less of an issue. Oklahoma’s Governor, Kevin Stitt, had generously arranged for all school district personnel in the state to be paid throughout the period of school closures. However, no one was required to report to work, so Operation Bulldog Thunder essentially depended on volunteerism for both the skilled labor of cooking and the unskilled labor of packaging and clean-up. Fortunately, a large number of people pulled together and answered the call. In fact, so many district teachers and staff wanted to help that Garrett assigned them to shifts first, before accepting parent and other community member volunteers. Maintaining proper nutrition and offering a fun variety of foods that
kids enjoyed often meant extra work bagging individual items, but the team did not flinch. One day they even served sloppy joes, which were a giant hit with both kids and parents!

The final dimension of coordinating this project was publicizing it, an especially challenging task considering the project had to go from idea to launch in 12 days. Garrett worked with the district’s communications office to publish information about the program and maps of delivery sites on the district’s website, and later to create YouTube videos and Facebook posts. But since many student families do not have reliable internet access, the district also needed to spread the word through traditional media. Thankfully, they were able to secure TV coverage for the program on local ABC News affiliate KSWO.

After Operation Bulldog Thunder concluded at the end of May, local children began receiving meals through a collaboration Garrett arranged with Meals-to-You, a nationwide food delivery-by-mail program run by the USDA and Baylor University in Waco, Texas. As of this writing, it will run through August 15, 2020, and district personnel are working to figure out how to continue providing food if schools are not reopened in August.

**Building on Previous Work**

To understand the conditions that made Operation Bulldog Thunder so successful, so quickly requires looking back at the work Garrett and Altus’s Food Service
Department were doing before the COVID-19 crisis hit. Altus already had important physical infrastructure and know-how, running two programs to increase students’ access to healthy foods.

First, while many U.S. school districts offer free breakfast in the cafeteria to eligible students, Altus was part of a much smaller group that offered it in the classroom prior to the commencement of the school day. This format requires extra labor (to distribute food and clean up classrooms) but has the advantage of reaching more kids by serving them where they already are and eliminating the effort of going to the cafeteria. Thanks to this program, the district already had equipment such as carts and coolers, which proved invaluable for moving food in Operation Bulldog Thunder. It also owned three hydroponic lettuce-growing machines to help provide salads, bought with an earlier grant and used at full capacity during the operation.

Second, for the past eight years, Altus had run a summer food program that served meals to about 225 students per day. Although it required kids to come to school to pick up the meals, plans were already in place to add a delivery option in 2020. The logistics behind this smaller-scale program proved to be crucial in mounting the emergency operation by establishing routines for food preparation during school closures.

More broadly, Altus’s Food Services team has long gone far beyond the minimum of providing food to take a lead-
ership role in promoting health. In addition to her “day job” leading Food Services, Garrett heads the district’s wellness committee. In this role, she coordinates and advises on functions, such as classroom health education, physical education, and the overall school wellness environment—signage, parent communications, and health-related events. In other words, Garrett orchestrates the district’s entire Whole Child health model, using the Oklahoma State Department of Health’s Certified Healthy Oklahoma School Program as a guide.

Around the country, it is uncommon for a school’s food service department (variously called “cafeteria management,” “child nutrition services,” etc.) to actively participate in wider health initiatives at that school. The fact that food service is considered part of teaching health and wellness at Altus Public Schools is commendable. That food service leads the overall effort is truly remarkable, or as Garrett says simply, “It’s huge!”

Altus Public Schools uses the CATCH program as a foundation for its Whole Child wellness work. Garrett’s Food Services group oversees the following initiatives, all of which are led by existing teachers and staff using existing resources:

- ensuring that health topics (many of which are included in state standards) are actually taught in the classroom
- providing physical education activities that reinforce nutrition concepts
encouraging creation and posting of signs depicting the GO-SLOW-WHOA food classification system in cafeterias and classrooms

- requiring each school to designate a CATCH champion and wellness team that reports quarterly to Garrett on their activities and progress.

Altus has also embraced the concept that food service staff are frontline health educators. Each summer, the district pays a group of their child nutrition professionals to attend Oklahoma State University’s Cooking for Kids Skill Development Training. The Cooking for Kids program is funded by the Oklahoma State Department of Education Child Nutrition and provides free, chef-led culinary training to school districts in Oklahoma. Altus’s participation also makes the district eligible to have a Cooking for Kids chef come to its schools and work with students, supplementing the formal nutrition education provided in classrooms and during physical education. Among other things, the chef conducts cooking demonstrations and holds sessions focused on tasting unusual fruits and vegetables and learning where and how they are grown.

The Cooking for Kids program has also helped improve recipes and menus offered at the schools and helped the staff set up an initiative to allow Pre-K and kindergarten children to get a pre-boxed entrée salad for lunch instead of a hot meal when they want to. About one hundred kids choose this option each day, helping them to consume more vegetables without having to piece together
their own salad from a salad bar—a big barrier for young children.

Through these initiatives, Garrett—like all good leaders—has created a culture of health within the district and nurtured participation from her own team, her supervisor, teachers, and staff in other departments, and parents. When she fought to get “hydration stations” (basically vertical water fountains to refill water bottles) in every school, teachers told her how much they enjoyed using them. When she launched the pre-boxed salad option, parents “lit up” Facebook with appreciation. When she came to her superintendent with ideas, she showed she could find government and community programs and dollars to fund them.

The substantial work the Food Services team has done to make health a priority at Altus Public Schools has delivered excellent health education during usual times and exceptional heroism during unusual times.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DUNCAN VAN DUSEN is the Founder and CEO of CATCH Global Foundation, whose evidence-based “Whole Child” health programs reach over 15,000 schools and more than 3 million children annually. He has consulted with hundreds of schools on creating a culture of wellness, and speaks regularly on health behavior theory, health education, and the youth vaping epidemic.

Van Dusen completed his undergraduate education at Princeton University and earned his MPH from the University of Texas School of Public Health. He has authored peer-reviewed scientific papers in Public Health Reports and Journal of School Health. He enjoys spending time outdoors with his family and empowering his own daughters to exercise, avoid tobacco, and eat their vegetables.