Teaching kids healthy habits to learn and live better.

MEDIA KIT

www.wellnessintheschools.org
Children spend about 12,000 hours in school between kindergarten and high school graduation, providing the ideal environment to shape their wellness behavior. Yet, many schools lack the necessary resources for students to achieve the proper nutrition and physical activity that are prerequisites to optimal learning.

Wellness in the Schools is a national non-profit that teaches kids healthy habits to learn and live better. We partner with public schools to provide nutrition and fitness education, healthy scratch-cooked meals and active recess periods. Our approach improves student outcomes and drives systemic, long-term change, shifting school cultures and ultimately fighting the childhood obesity epidemic.

Wellness in the Schools started in 2005 in a classroom at the Ella Baker School (NYC PS 225) in New York City. In partnership with the Department of Education, our programs this year alone reach over 60,000 students in over 120 public schools, in 4 states, every single day. In the past 12 years, we have cooked more than 11 million school meals and led more than 54,000 hours of play. We are continuing to expand our national footprint, helping schools across the country become healthier places for students to learn and grow.

More than one in three children under 18 are overweight or obese in the United States.

learn more at www.wellnessintheschools.org
WHO WE ARE

Leadership

NANCY E. EASTON  Executive Director and Co-Founder

Since founding Wellness in the Schools in 2005, Nancy has grown the non-profit from one classroom into a national organization that now reaches over 60,000 students in over 120 public schools each day.

Nancy is a regular commentator and speaker on school food and child wellness, and has been widely recognized for her leadership. She was honored by First Lady Michelle Obama at the launch of Chefs Move! to Schools. She was named a Food Revolution Hero by acclaimed chef-food activist Jamie Oliver, and Ann Cooper, the “Renegade Lunch Lady,” recognized her as a Lunchbox Hero for her dedication to school lunch reform. Nancy received a 2012 Westy Award for her innovative work, and was honored by Manhattan Borough President Gale Brewer, then a New York City Council Member.

Before co-founding Wellness in the Schools, Nancy spent 15 years as a teacher, mentor, and school leader at the New York City Department of Education. She holds a Master’s in Education from Bank Street College of Education, her Administration and Supervision certification from Fordham University, and a Bachelor of Arts from Princeton University, where she was a three-sport athlete. Nancy is also a graduate of the Institute for Integrative Nutrition and is certified by the American Association of Drugless Practitioners.

Nancy is a lifelong athlete (including marathon and Ironman triathlon distances), an avid gardener, and mother of three.

CHEF BILL TELEPAN  Executive Chef

Chef Bill Telepan, Executive Chef of Oceana, is one of New York’s leaders in sourcing quality ingredients from small farms and local purveyors. Bill was the chef and owner of the critically-acclaimed, Michelin-starred Telepan Restaurant on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, and before that he worked at Le Cirque, Le Bernardin, Ansonia, and Judson Grill. He also worked under the legendary Chef Alain Chapel in Lyons after graduating from the Culinary Institute of America.

Since 2008, Bill has been the Executive Chef of Wellness in the Schools. As the first chef to join our team, Bill has served as a leader of the Cook for Kids program by developing nutritious school menus, training cafeteria workers, and teaching culinary and nutrition concepts to students, parents and teachers. In 2009, Bill was honored with a selection to join First Lady Michelle Obama’s Chefs Move! to Schools task force and preliminary conferences. Bill lives in Manhattan with his wife and daughter.

learn more at www.wellnessintheschools.org
SUPPORT FOR OUR WORK

SCHOOLS
You are changing lives; one at a time, day by day. - Principal Cecilia Kaplinsky, PS 216 Brooklyn

Behavioral issues have significantly decreased and we find that the kids are better behaved in the classroom and at lunch when they have a FIT BIT. - Principal Constance Hahn, PS 108

PARENTS
The partnership between WITS and my child’s school has provided an amazing framework for ongoing discussions about nutrition, food sourcing, cooking, environmental activism, and children’s physical play.
- Cristina Latici, Parent & Garden Committee Co-Chair, PS 3

PARTNERS
WITS can be life-changing for a student who isn’t exposed to these ingredients or this type of nutrition and wellness education. By exposing a student to nutritious and better quality food, we can have a lifelong impact. - Eric Goldstein, CEO, The Office of School Support Services, New York City Department of Education

FUNDERS
The way we eat in this country has to change for everyone. For that to happen, it has to start at a young age. Wellness in the Schools is pioneering that change. - Nick Marsh, CEO, Chop’t Creative Salad Company

CHEFS
The most rewarding part of working with WITS is seeing not only how food is being prepared, and the food that is being made available to the students, but also seeing the kids becoming much more receptive to healthy food. It’s seeing them hopefully becoming advocates for healthy eating and taking that knowledge home to their parents and siblings, and actually being teachers in their own households.
- Seamus Mullen, Chef/Owner, Tertulia, El Colmado

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TEDxMontclair: Dive in for Change, Nancy Easton
AMERICAN WAY: Food for Thought

Dive in for Change, Nancy Easton

The New York City Principal Breaking Boundaries One Bite at a Time
Give a Kid a Knife and He May Eat More Carrots
How a Weekly Volunteer Gig Turned into Bill Telepan’s Other Job

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USDA Blog: A Case Study in Wellness at PS 145-Supporting Schools and Supporting Nutrition Standards
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Fox 5: Food and Kids
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Examiner: An exclusive look at Wellness in the Schools: Inspiring healthy habits for kids
The Village Voice: Handle With Care: Bill Telepan’s Success Has Been in Building Community
The Miami Herald: Child Wellness Expert Visits Coral Gables
National Farm to School Network: First Graders Don’t Care Much About Michelin Stars
CBS Miami: Trend Tracker Talks Kids Fitness with Nancy Easton
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Food Management: Chefs Empower Students and Students to Improve Food
Reading, Math and Sushi: Cooking as a Health Lesson

BY RICHARD SCHIFFMAN  MARCH 28, 2017

On a recent Tuesday, the airy rooftop greenhouse at P.S. 333 on the Upper West Side of Manhattan was a hive of purposeful activity as students massaged olive oil into kale and ground spices for a salad they were preparing to serve at lunch.

"Could we spread this out and make it look edible," Yazdara Garcia urged, as the children drizzled balsamic dressing over a mass of spiraled zucchini and garnished the tray with cherry tomatoes plucked from a sprawling vine growing a few feet away.

Ms. Garcia, a graduate of the Natural Gourmet Institute in Manhattan, is one of a growing number of professional chefs assigned to the city’s schools. As part of a program called Wellness in the Schools (WITS), she is spending three years at P.S. 333, teaching cooking and nutrition classes to children and organizing educational events for their parents after school hours.

The program, which aims to teach public school students about healthful eating and fitness, partners with chefs like Ms. Garcia and Bill Telepan of the restaurant Oceana to develop nutritious recipes children are excited about trying. It’s a modern take on the home ec class. The goal is not to try to make kids eat food that they won’t like but to make things they already like healthier, and to instill an interest in cooking fresh, healthy food that carries over to the way the children eat at home.

WITS, now a national nonprofit reaching 50,000 children in four states, is the brainchild of Nancy Easton, who spent 25 years as a teacher, mentor and administrator in the New York school system. Ms. Easton was appalled to see overweight students unable to walk up a flight of stairs without stopping to catch their breath at the school she directed on the Lower East Side in the 1990s. That was long before the childhood obesity epidemic became big news. Of public school children in New York City, 40 percent are either overweight or obese, which is higher than the state average of 32 percent.

"Schools are examples for reading, writing and arithmetic, examples for how to behave," Ms. Easton said. "They need to become examples for healthy living."

She started by cooking wholesome meals for a handful of her own students. Gradually, a formal program to combat obesity took shape and eventually spread to more than 100 schools (87 of which are in New York). WITS recently added a program called Coach for Kids, in which trained fitness professionals lead children in activities at recess and after school. Ms. Easton says her goal is to be in all of the city’s elementary schools within 10 years.

WITS, which is based in Harlem, prioritizes working in underprivileged neighborhoods. The program is financed through grants and private donations. Schools contribute part of the cost from their supplementary budget on a sliding scale calibrated to the income level of the students’ families.

WITS introduced its alternative menu in partnership with the city’s Department of Education. For many lower-income children, school lunch is the only cooked meal of the day, supplying them with over half of their daily nutrition. Although the WITS program does not depend on government funding, some school nutrition advocates are concerned about efforts to weaken or defund federal initiatives, including a bill introduced by Representative Steve King, Republican of Iowa, in January, which would repeal nutrition standards for the national school lunch and breakfast programs.

Claire Lowenstein, the principal at P.S. 333, says the WITS program has been an excellent investment. “More of our students are eating the school lunch and fewer are bringing their food from home than ever before,” she said.

Gone is the usual kid-bait like fried mozzarella sticks and chicken fingers. In their place are a daily salad bar, wraps and main dishes like the Caribbean specialty chicken guisado and vegetarian dumplings, created whenever possible with unprocessed, seasonal and locally farmed ingredients.

Judging from the children’s plates in the lunchroom heaped with salad and bowls of vegetarian chili, the healthy new fare is a success.

“It’s insane how much they love salads,” said Mr. Telepan, who was at the school recently to help with the meal for a wellness event. “It is a known fact that it takes kids between eight and 15 times of trying something before they like it,” he said, adding, “it can take adults 30 times.”

Mr. Telepan, who joined the WITS team in 2008, recalled how students at a school in the Bronx took instantly to the celery root soup and baked rutabaga fries with cranberry relish he cooked for them, although none had ever tried these vegetables before.

“I’ll rarely find a kid who won’t eat something that they themselves have made,” Ms. Garcia said. “They’re into the best salespeople. They are like ‘you’ve got to try this,’ with their friends. It’s contagious!”

Kale chips were a recent hit, and so was the black bean brownie, in which beans, oats and honey stand in for flour and processed sugar. “Sounds kind of gross,” one of the young salad makers said, but it turned out to be creamy and delicious.

Like other WITS chefs, Ms. Garcia helps train the kitchen workers to prepare healthy food. That can be a challenge. Many school kitchens are lacking in even basic equipment, and cafeteria staff members are not accustomed to cooking from scratch with fresh ingredients. There are also financial constraints: Nutritious meals can be hard to create on food budgets that can be as low as a dollar a day per student served.

Some argue that processed foods offers inexpensive calories, and that the fresh fruits and vegetables championed by WITS are beyond the budget of many low-income families. Ms. Garcia acknowledges that quality ingredients don’t always come cheaply. But she points to initiatives like the city’s Health Bucks program which helps home cooks stretch food stamp dollars by paying bonuses for healthy purchases.

Ultimately, she said, “we either pay the farmer or the pharmacist.” In the neighborhood of the South Bronx where Ms. Garcia grew up, there were high rates of preventable and reversible diseases like high blood pressure, high cholesterol and Type 2 diabetes — all illnesses that research links to poor diet. Her own parents have cardiovascular conditions that she attributes to their diets.

While adults like to talk about the health benefits of eating well, for the kids the reason is often simply that it tastes great.

Ike Shaw, age 10, tried vegetable sushi for the first time in Ms. Garcia’s food lab and became a big fan. He now makes it for his family at least twice a month.

“I was like, how can something be so healthy and so good at the same time,” Ike said as he chopped carrots, cucumbers and orange bell peppers in his family kitchen together with his 11-year-old sister, Sai.

She has introduced the family to new salad dressings and soups, which she also learned to make at the food lab. Their mother, Amy Shaw, a lawyer, says that whatever they try in Ms. Garcia’s class, they insist on recreating at home — and she stays out of the kitchen.

Ms. Shaw admits that she is not much of a cook, but says her children’s enthusiasm has been infectious. Cooking is now a family affair that has brought them closer. “I love that they are so passionate about it,” Ms. Shaw said. “Seeing how confident they are around cooking helps me relax around it too.”
Food for Thought

Activist Nancy Easton brings healthy eating — and living — to children at public schools.

BY FIONA J. KIRK, FEBRUARY 2015

In the mid-1990s, when Nancy Easton worked as a public school leader in New York City, she was dismayed to see her students eating a bag of chips and drinking a bottle of soda for breakfast each morning. This was usually followed by a lunch of processed food from the cafeteria. Not surprisingly, the kids couldn’t walk up a flight of stairs without stopping to catch their breath and were unable to focus in class. That’s why in 2005 Easton founded the non-profit Wellness in the Schools (WITS) with the mission of inspiring healthy eating, environmental awareness and fitness as a way of life for kids in public schools. Its “Cook for Kids” initiative is multi-pronged, including an AmeriCorps-type program for recent culinary graduates that places them in schools to work alongside cafeteria workers; labs where students learn to cook a meal, which is then incorporated into the school menu; and workshops for parents on healthy home cooking. We spoke to Easton about her initiatives and the difference they are making in the lives of these kids.

American Way: Tell us more about Cook for Kids. Nancy Easton: The centerpiece of the Cook for Kids program takes place in the cafeteria, where we work closely with the department of education to rewrite the school lunch menu so it’s more of a scratch-cooked menu. The WITS chef works alongside school lunch workers to prepare the meals and to train the lunch workers on the implementation of this new menu, so the chef becomes part of the fabric of the school and part of the shift in culture to a healthier environment.

AW: What early obstacles did you have to overcome? NE: Our biggest challenge to date has also become our greatest opportunity. As a small nonprofit, partnering with the New York City Department of Education was a true learning experience. The NYC DOE is the largest school district in our country, serving approximately one million children daily. To learn to navigate their world, work within the many constraints and face opposition at times was very challenging at first. Today, the NYC DOE is our most important partner and our biggest advocate. Together, we’re feeding children healthier every day.

AW: This year, WITS celebrates its 10-year anniversary. Looking back, what memories stand out? NE: The daily victories are certainly worth noting. Like the child devouring kale after never seeing it prior to our labs. Or the child coming up to a WITS chef and telling her that he lost ten pounds over the year because she taught him how to eat healthfully. Or the skeptical “lunch lady” telling us she will never serve chicken fingers again after working with us and learning what’s best for kids.

AW: And what about WITS’ other initiatives: Coach for Kids and Green for Kids? NE: With Coach for Kids, we place current or former athletes in the schools with two goals: to get the least active kids moving and to prevent bullying. They set up a positive structure on the recess yard so it’s controlled chaos. The larger goal is that kids have a healthy lunch, a positive recess experience and then head back to class, ready to focus and learn. With Green for Kids, we partner with different environmental organizations and garden programs. And this year we’re using hydroponic tower gardens to teach children about environmental issues and the value of growing locally.

AW: Who was your inspiration? NE: My mother continues to be a role model and inspiration for me. As a child, I was a bit disappointed and even embarrassed that I was the only kid with brown bread and carob brownies in my lunch. No one wanted to trade with me! As I got older, I began to value her forward thinking and attention to our health and wellbeing. My mom was certainly way ahead of the trend and I still learn so much from her.

AW: Where do you see the organization going in the next 10 years? NE: I’d like to see us become obsolete. That the schools are healthy and kids are active and eating well and learning to cook without us, that that’s become the norm. And I’d love to bring back home economics classes and teach kids that cooking can and should be an easy skill. I think that’s a very clear way we can fight the obesity epidemic.

BY THE NUMBERS: WITS grew from serving a class of 16 kids in one New York City public school to reaching 30,000 students across the country today.

SETTING THE EXAMPLE: Easton is a mother of three who’s run marathons, triathlons and even an Ironman distance triathlon.

DROPPING NAMES: The WITS team includes Michelin--starred chef Bill Telepan as its executive chef, and Easton was recently named a “food revolution hero” by chef activist Jamie Oliver. Not surprisingly, the organization is part of first lady Michelle Obama’s “Chefs Move to Schools” planning team.
NEW YORK (WABC) -- Victoria Baluk is a chef who works for Wellness in the Schools, or 'WITS', a non-profit aimed at empowering schools to provide healthier experiences to their students.

"We come in with our chefs and our coaches, but the school has to be invested in this, and has to see their own goals to create healthier places to learn together - we can't do it alone," said Nancy Easton.

Easton was a school principal before she founded WITS eleven years ago. When WITS teams with a school, it sends over coaches to coordinate more active recess periods. Chefs work with cafeteria staff to revamp school menus to feature made-from-scratch meals and more salads and vegetables instead of processed food.

New York Chef Bill Telepan leads the charge for WITS.

"We got into a lot of high poverty schools and areas where there are food deserts, not a lot of fresh food available, and we give them lessons, life lessons of what healthy eating is, and that's what it's about," says Telepan.

After three years of WITS training, schools run on their own. The New Settlement School in the Bronx is an example of that, but students still get treated to lab classes where they learn about nutrition and cooking.

The program gives students a sense of pride, and puts them on a healthy path.

WITS is in 75 schools and this year they are serving 34,000 children. The goal is to get WITS to 800 schools city-wide.
How a Weekly Volunteer Gig Turned into Bill Telepan’s Other Job

The three-star chef hits the school cafeteria.

BY JAN GREENBERG, EDIBLE MANHATTAN, 2009

On a recent weekday the dining room at Telepan was crowded: Diners savored duck eggs with fava beans and green garlic; halibut with chanterelles; heritage pork with wilted frisée and housemade charcuterie with farro, radishes and watercress. The chef, Bill Telepan, left the restaurant near midday, but the next morning he dropped his daughter at school, rode the A train all the way to 207th Street, and by 9:30 was in the kitchen of Muscato/Amistad Public School cooking vegetarian chili for hundreds of public school students—from a recipe he hopes will be replicated in cafeterias citywide.

“We all know that school food is a hot issue right now,” says Nancy Easton, one of the founders of the not-for-profit Wellness in the Schools, of which Bill is a startlingly active member. “There are conferences, seminars, special events. Obama even spoke about it when he addressed the American Medical Association. But other than Bill, no chef in this city has taken on this issue from a grassroots, bottom-up level.”

If you know Bill Telepan at all—if you dined on his farm-forward fare when he manned the stoves at Judson Grill, or more recently at his eponymous Telepan, or if you know his gorgeous, aptly named cookbook Inspired by Ingredients—you probably can’t imagine him cooking anything that’s been out of the earth for more than a few hours. He’s been a Greenmarket regular since 1991, when, as sous-chef at Gotham Bar & Grill, he was one of a then-small coterie of chefs, including Peter Hoffman (Savoy, Back Forty), Michael Romano (Union Square Cafe) and Jean-Georges Vongerichten (Le Cirque) who were early devotees of fresh, local ingredients. He remains a beloved regular at Union Square, a longtime best customer and personal friend of scores of farmers who sell there.

Running a restaurant is more than a full-time job, and running a restaurant that showcases local food is even harder (I just ask him what it’s like to haul all those bags of eggplant and escarole to the Upper West Side, and how much simpler it would be to have industrial ingredients delivered to his door). But over the past year Bill has somehow found the time to take on New York City school food, too. And while it’s become commonplace for star chefs to criticize what passes for lunch in school cafeterias, with the most dedicated leading an occasional group of students on a tour of the Greenmarket or donating food for a fund-raiser, Bill has dived headlong into the belly of the bureaucratic beast, leaving his restaurant stoves several days a week to meet with school lunch officials, develop recipes and literally work the lunch line in cafeterias, all in an effort to improve the meals New York City feeds to over 800,000 students, including his own daughter. But unlike so many culinary glitterati who criticize from afar, Bill isn’t talking about students savoring heirloom lettuces grown out back. Like the man who made soup from a stone, this three-star chef is determined to apply his white-tablecloth skills to the stark, fluorescent-lit realities of the cafeteria tray.

Which are these: The USDA reimburses public schools roughly $2.57 for each free lunch it serves, $2.17 for a reduced-price lunch and 24 cents for a paid lunch. The USDA also subsidizes school milk programs, providing $0.18 to school milk programs for each milk served. The schools also benefit from $0.25 for each hot meal served.

“With each pass,” says Telepan, “we’ve learned a little more and been able to do more.”

Running a restaurant is more than a full-time job, and running a school cafeteria requires that you do the very best with what you have. As with his restaurants, Telepan’s approach to school lunch focuses on what it is they’re teaching. Each day’s menu at the Telepan cafeteria includes meat, beans, a starch and a vegetable. Children who eat school lunch in New York City are required to eat half of their meal at the cafeteria tray. Telepan’s meals are designed to give kids the nutrition they need to do their best and provide them with a variety of healthy ingredients to try and enjoy.

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