

*A publication of the Obesity, Nutrition & Physical Activity Program*

*Spring 2025*

Hello to our partners and friends across the state! We're inching closer to the end of the school year and supporting events like Bike to School Day and Eat Smart to Play Hard fun days.

In recognition of National Nutrition Month in March, our fabulous Epidemiologist Alex Hickmott prepared our annual childhood obesity report. Coordinators posted fun food ideas on Facebook, kicked off healthy challenges, talked on radio shows, and hosted planting days.

A shout out to Farmington's Nutrition Program Supervisor Marie Johnson for recognizing Nutrition Month by sponsoring the evidence-based, nutrition education program, FoodPlay, at two preschools and three elementary schools.



*Above, Healthy Kids Chaves County honored Roswell Independent Schools (RISD) nutrition services staff during Nutrition Month. RISD staff packaged to-go lunches amid school closures due to high winds. Bravo to RISD and all NM school nutrition professionals for feeding our kids!*

Goodbye and best wishes to Healthy Kids Grant County Coordinator Cassandra Hartley, who is moving to Billings, MT. Cassandra has a special talent of connecting with kids, and she made great progress working in the Silver City and Cobre school districts with their SHACs, among other projects. "She has been a wonderful colleague, and we'll miss her," says co-coordinator Alicia Edwards. We agree!

## News & Events

Please welcome Nicolette (also goes by Nicky) Perez, our newest health educator in the Obesity, Nutrition & Physical Activity Program! A

Santa Fe native and UNM graduate, Nicolette, worked in the Immunization Program as a health educator



in the northeast region. She cares about healthy eating, and loves playing soccer and going to the gym. She says she's excited to work with everyone!

Nicole Duran is kicking off programs in Anton Chico as our new Healthy Kids Guadalupe County co-coordinator. Nicole grew up on a farm in Dilia, and is raising two amazing special-needs children, 8-year-old Riley "Pickles" and 11-year-old Catherine. We'll share more info soon!

## Save the Date!

Register today (*space is limited*) and join us for the free inaugural NM Local Food Summit: <https://www.ournewmexico.food/>

## Upcoming Stories

- Guadalupe County activities
- Hydroponic gardens
- Trail connectivity in Chaves County



# Healthy Preschools

Increasing opportunities for healthy eating  
& physical activity in preschool settings



## HKHP Challenge Promotes Physical Activity in Preschools

Early childhood education and care centers throughout New Mexico are giving their young students more time to move their bodies as a part of the New Mexico Department of Health's Healthy Kids Healthy Preschool Challenge.

Fifty-two centers participated in the four-week HKHP Challenge this past October, which involves the following activities:

- Increase physical activity to 120 minutes a day.
- Reduce screen time to no more than 30 minutes.
- Offer family engagement activities once a week.



At Christina Kent Early Childhood Center in

Albuquerque, physical activity ideas are posted around the playground and classrooms, inspiring teachers to offer children a variety of creative play.



"We're always encouraging physical activity so this challenge was a great opportunity to have that reminder and motivate teachers to do more," said Assistant Director Andrew Martinez. "We believe that learning can happen more outside of the classroom; kids are learning collaboration, communication, emotional regulation – social emotional skills we focus on here."

Teachers at Christina Kent learned the simplest activities can be the most fun. Students, ages 2 to 5, lined up to take turns dragging around giant bowling pins tied to a string, pretending they were dogs or cars. Another popular one was jumping over a string on the ground.

"In my experience in the classroom, I have found that kids just love to move," Andrew said. "When people talk about physical activity, they think about P.E. and playing elaborate games with all these rules. This gives teachers an opportunity to think about physical activity a little different. It doesn't have to be so complicated."

The Healthy Kids Healthy Preschool Program honors centers with a silver award for completing the challenge, and a gold one if they also develop and implement

*Preschoolers at Christina Kent Early Childhood Center have fun with simple activities like playing hopscotch and going on walks in the neighborhood. (Above right, a trick-or-treat walk.)*

a wellness policy, one of the HKHP strategies to support healthy nutrition and physical activity for preschoolers.

Andrew said he and Executive Director Sondra Carpenter jumped on the idea of a wellness policy because they want to support healthy students and teachers. "It was a good insight for us," he said.

Thanks, Andrew and Sondra for investing in the health of your students and staff, and congratulations on completing the challenge for the second year!



# Coordinator Corner



## Gardens with Caron Powers

Healthy Kids Roosevelt County Coordinator Caron Powers worked with partners in Portales to establish a school garden seven years ago and has expanded each year, including starting a new preschool garden. Here, she shares her experiences.

*James Elementary's award winning garden features 24 raised beds, a worm garden, compost, a Discovery Center outdoor classroom & a storage shed.*



### Gardening Advice

- You need the principal's support & a gardening champion at the school.
- **Recognition matters!** Facilitate thank-you posters from students and hand-deliver to every supportive business. Send thank you notes to the principal to share with teachers. Take pictures of partners at the garden and honor them on Facebook and a local newsletter. Inform the school board and superintendent about the garden's success.
- Check out Caron's planting guide for the elementary and preschool teachers in the [Coordinator Corner folder](#).
- Caron's membership with her local health council and the Chamber of Commerce gave her increased connections and led to the Council helping fund Brown's garden.
- Talk to your city about the [Clean & Beautiful Grant](#) to see if HKHC could be included.
- Tap into any business that already supports the school where you're planning the garden. Ask lumber, hardware and gardening businesses for discounts/donations.
- Make sure to locate your garden close to a water source and get good soil.

*Volunteers Curt Jaynes (right) and Joe Ortega determine the best location for the first raised beds at James Elementary. Both continue to support James' garden & the garden at Brown Early Childhood Center.*

and it didn't matter. What she had – strong community connections and fundraising hustle – was all she needed. She was fortunate that school staff supported her idea. The success of James' garden made it easier for Caron to set one up at Brown Early Childhood Center a year ago.

Curt Jaynes, the owner of Portales' only garden shop at the time, became an invaluable partner and mentor, advising Caron on crop timing, garden location, and planting tips. Joe Ortega, a fellow teacher, agreed to build the raised beds for free.

From there, she solicited discounts and donated supplies from local businesses, talked to the City about including the garden in its Clean and Beautiful Grant, and applied for a community grant from Wal-Mart. Another key component was finding a garden champion at the school, who helps with planting days and summer watering.

Caron was a year into her role as a HKHC coordinator when she sought partnerships to establish a garden at James Elementary. She didn't have funding or gardening knowledge,



# Healthy Eating in Schools



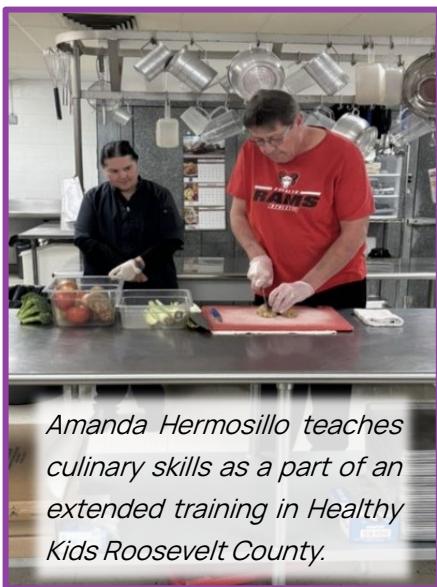
Strategies that increase access to healthy, local foods in NM schools

## State Trains Schools on Healthy Universal School Meals

School nutrition staff are not alone in implementing state's new Healthy Universal School Meals (HUSM) program. "I want people to take it slowly and get the help they need," said Amanda Hermosillo, Culinary Operations Specialist at the Public Education Department (PED). "Barriers will always exist, but we'll try to work through them realistically and together."

PED's HUSM team and Gabriel Gaarden of ONAPA are training 18 school districts in how to comply with the state's rules around scratch cooking and waste reduction that will be mandated starting next school year. Amanda provides tips, brainstorms solutions to challenges, and teaches culinary skills, depending on the length of the training. Gabriel highlights cafeteria promotions, Farm to School programs, and other HKHC strategies that create welcome, healthy, and engaging meal spaces.

"We've long partnered with PED to support healthy school environments and increasing opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity. This is another way to reach that goal," Gabriel said. "It's also important that state agencies that oversee these programs have the face time and relationship building with schools."



Gabriel shows examples of successful edible gardens, Nuevo Thursdays taste tests, salad bar implementation, fun cafeteria themes, cafeteria staff promotion, and healthy fundraisers. Amanda helps food service staff understand the new state rules.

"We can provide healthy, nutritious, and delicious meals and occasionally keep the fan favorites like chicken tenders," Amanda said. "Know when you can take a short cut, and tailor your menu to when you have the most bandwidth."

Most schools meet scratch cooking rules for whole fruits and vegetables. The meat, grains and meat alternatives are more challenging. Amanda advises people to plan ahead and thoughtfully consider their menus based on their equipment, staff capacity

and capabilities. "A properly trained team is your greatest asset. If you have qualified people, you can do it," she said.



### Scratch Cooking Tips by Amanda Hermosillo

- Prioritize Fresh, Whole Ingredients:** Start by sourcing seasonal fruits and vegetables, quality proteins, and grains and then build dishes around them.
- Embrace Prep:** Organize and prep all your ingredients before you start cooking when you can. This allows for a smoother process as you won't scramble to chop, blend or peel during cook time.
- Don't Overcomplicate Things:** Keep it simple at first. A few quality ingredients prepared well can make an exceptional dish. Perfect a few classic recipes and build from there.

# Healthy Eating in Schools

## HKHC Schools Enhance Meals with Scratch Cooking

Being organized, planning ahead, and training staff enabled Shaunna Smith to meet the new scratch cooking standards before they are required next year. "First, you have to have buy-in with your staff so they understand the importance of it and why they are doing it. And you have to learn to maximize your time spent in the kitchen," said Shaunna, Portales' Food Service Director in Healthy Kids Roosevelt County.

Shaunna started this school year by slowly adding scratch items that her staff mastered before adding more. She cross trains her staff on every aspect of food service, including delivery driving, so she has a team that can cook every item and help wherever needed.

"It's helpful to do a little bit at a time and figure out what works and what doesn't," she said. "Networking has been so important too.

Don't try to do it all by yourself. I get on zoom calls with directors so we can talk through things and share what we're doing."



*Shaunna Smith's district earned a Golden Chile Award in 2024 for participating in the NM Grown Program.*

Food Service Manager Samantha Grijalva taps into grants to buy equipment that makes it easier to prep and cook food for about 985 students in the Cobre Consolidated School District. The mother-daughter team learned that attending conferences and being a member of the School Nutrition Association was an essential first step in learning.

"We keep in mind that PED is just a phone call away," said Alma. "We don't hesitate to ask, and they don't hesitate to answer."



*Left, students love that Elida's food service team swapped packaged pancakes for scratch cooked ones. Director Beth Fair (right) plans menus that combine easier prepared meals with scratch cooked ones in Roosevelt County.*

### Healthy Universal School Meals Rules\*

- At least 50% of school meal components are freshly prepared
- Reduce food waste by providing K-5 students up to 20 minutes of seat time, and require share tables where food may be returned/shared
- Incorporate student voice and choice
- Use NM Grown foods

*\* Minimum requirements for Level 1*

Shaunna consistently evaluates food preferences of the 2,500 students she and her staff serve. She uses chopped fruit in the schools' salad bars because kids are more likely to eat it. Students select food they want, rather than being served, which helps reduce waste. Shaunna also meets regularly with the Student Council for feedback.

In Healthy Kids Grant County, Food Service Director Alma Grijalva has a team that hustles to provide about 75% scratch-cooked meals. "I think it's healthier for the kids," she said.



*In Healthy Kids Grant County, students are impressed with the long roots of their school's freshly grown lettuce during a taste test.*

# New Mexico Grown

Increasing access to healthy, local food in schools, preschools & senior centers

## Ramel Family Farms Centers Business around NM Grown

In a way, the New Mexico (NM) Grown Program helped recruit Ramel Family Farms to Raton. Brothers Kayvan and Hassan Khalatbari moved from Trinidad to lease farm property from the city of Raton and serve the Northern New Mexico community with their gourmet lettuce blends, mushrooms and regionally grown food items in a retail store downtown.

"It seemed like a cool opportunity to support a healthy food system that reaches into our more vulnerable communities," Kayvan said. "The NM Grown Program makes sure people can buy from us consistently. If it wasn't for state money, they would have to buy the cheapest product they can find, and that's not going to be from a local farmer."

Schools in Raton, Wagon Mound, Cimarron and Mora request Ramel's "Raton blend" of mustard greens, baby kale, arugula and gourmet lettuce - a student favorite. "We ask for feedback all the time, and it's been nothing but great from the littlest kids to seniors," Kayvan said. "Our greens have a shelf life of three weeks in the winter, so schools and senior centers appreciate that it lasts longer, and you can taste the nutritional content."

Raton Public Schools Food Service Director Michael Romero-Sandoval said students love Ramel's fresh, tasty greens that his

team uses in school salads. "During other times of the year, especially during NM Grown Month in October, they have provided wonderful tasting heirloom tomatoes, melons, and squash," he said. "Ramel is so easy to work with, we are so glad to have a local grower in our community!"

Connecting to the Raton community has been a priority for Ramel Farm; they opened their farm to school field trips, are restoring the El Raton Theater, and established a retail store downtown that quickly became a gathering place for locals. There, they sell their freshly grown mushrooms as well as regional food products from about 50 vendors who did not have a marketplace before. Most of their protein comes from women-owned ranches in New Mexico and Colorado.

"We're expanding our grocery items and dairy products to as many New Mexico companies as we can," Kayvan said. We are so glad you're here, Ramel Family Farms! Learn more at [ramelfamilyfarms.com](http://ramelfamilyfarms.com).



*Above, brothers Kayvan (second from right) and Hassan Khalatbari (far right) accept their award in the 2024 Golden Chile Awards Program for selling their produce to local institutions, following sustainable and organic farming practices, and providing community education. They earned a high-level award in their first full year of operation.*

*Right, Ramel Family Farms harvests 225 to 250 pounds of lettuce each week, plus seasonal produce and gourmet mushrooms. The five-member farm team is replacing garden beds with more hydroponic towers in their 6,000-square-foot greenhouse.*

