

Creating Policy, Systems, and Environmental Change: Success Story



Leadership Students Launch Water Access and Appeal Campaign, Sparking Significant Impact

Program

Setting: K-12 and Afterschool

Sub-Strategy (ECE, K-12 and Afterschool, Healthcare Clinics, Food Banks/Food Pantries ONLY): Water Access and Appeal

Community Assets

Lawndale Elementary School District (LESD) has fostered a community of well-being, cohesiveness, and inclusivity, which were all pivotal to the success of the implementation of the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project to increase water access and appeal at Rogers Middle School. In partnership with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, the CalFresh Healthy Living (CFHL) team at LESD was connected with another CFHL-funded organization, Food Access Los Angeles, which provided nutrition education and ReThink Your Drink demos to complement the YPAR project. The collaboration between the LESD CFHL team, Food Access Los Angeles, Mrs. Tseng (a dedicated adult ally at Rogers Middle School), and the LESD community, enhanced the ongoing water access and appeal efforts at the school and kept students' health and well-being at the forefront of their work.

Over the past few years, the LESD CFHL team has worked with the school's Nutrition and Wellness Services Department to reduce the intake of sugar-sweetened beverages

and increase water consumption among students. The LESD CFHL team liaised with key members of the school community and offered training and feedback on students' water access and appeal efforts throughout the duration of the campaign. Additionally, the partnership with Food Access Los Angeles has reached over 600 middle-school students through their 19 *Rethink Your Drink* sessions over the course of the 2023-2024 school year.

Social and Community Context

LESD is located within the City of Lawndale, in the South Bay of Los Angeles County. According to the City of Lawndale, the city has a rich history of agricultural advancement and rail transportation that led to the rapid development of the city. Given Lawndale's urbanization, Lawndale has economically diverse communities that have been historically marginalized. LESD serves a diverse population of 91% BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students. Additionally, about 50% of students speak a language other than English as their primary language, and about 80% of students qualify for Free and Reduced Price Meals.

The school community at Will Rogers Middle School has been committed to enhancing student health and well-being, with students actively advocating for an increased number of clean and accessible bottle filling stations to support hydration efforts during the 23/24 school year. Implementing YPAR as part of the Water Access and Appeal strategy invited students to the decision-making process and allowed them to implement their lived experience to advance equity. This created a positive space for youth to address outcomes in their own local school context by leading and sharing their voice. As Cammarota and Fine stated, YPAR "education is something students do—instead of being done to them...." (2008).

Collaborative Action

Water Access and Appeal was a multi-faceted effort championed by eighth-grade leadership students at Rogers Middle School. These efforts were supported by Mrs. Tseng, an eighth-grade science teacher and LESD Champion, who opened her classroom to the CFHL team. Mrs. Tseng acted as a supportive adult ally throughout the campaign, creating an encouraging atmosphere that empowered students to ask questions and advocate for the changes they wanted to see in their school.

The 15 Rogers Middle School leadership students worked collaboratively to create a comprehensive action plan approved by their administrator, developed an environmental and readiness assessment, promoted hydration stations around their campus, and conducted *Rethink Your Drink* taste tests. These students also participated in four CFHL-coordinated media training sessions hosted by Fraser

Communications, which allowed them to learn, collaborate, share ideas, and develop materials to prompt their audience to action.

The students' efforts culminated in a final presentation to the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent of Business Services, Director of Nutrition and Wellness Services, Director of Maintenance and Operations, and their Administrator. Their presentation highlighted current issues with hydration stations on campus, assessment results, a water taste test, and their call-to-action. Students asked their administrators to develop a maintenance plan for hydration stations, as well as the installation of more hydration stations. The students' impactful promotional campaign has led to the replacement of one hydration station, with exciting plans underway to install two more at their school, bringing fresh momentum to enhancing campus health and wellness.

Sustaining Success

Because the leadership students at Rogers Middle School were motivated, collaborative, and tactful in their Water Access and Appeal campaign, district administrators recognized students' efforts and took on the responsibility for sustaining school hydration stations. Additionally, the Director of Maintenance and Operations was moved by the students' endeavors and recognized the value in working with custodial staff to ensure all hydration stations are regularly cleaned and maintained.

The leadership students' efforts paved the way for future student-led projects and sparked conversations among administrators, resulting in policy, systems, and environmental changes. Their efforts led to the installation of 14 new hydration stations across the district during the summer of 2024, benefiting hundreds of current and future students by giving them increased access to clean, fresh water at school.

Participant and Partner Quotes

In your opinion, what makes this project significant?

"One of the things we tell kids in leadership is you have a voice, it's important to speak up. So when they get involved in a project like YPAR and they can see through the result of their research, their fact-finding, their data collection and then turning that into a strategic presentation to decision makers, when they see the result of all that work turned into having their request granted because they put so much effort and thought into their work- that just reinforces what we keep telling them about their power of their voice." - Sylvia Tseng (Science Teacher/Leadership Advisor, with permission)

Photograph (optional)



Before



After

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