

← Back

OUSD Students Dig In to Unique Learning Opportunities at The Center

OUSD News •  *Ericka Doolittle* • 2 days ago • Tuesday, Feb 8 at 2:18 PM • **Oakland Unified School District, + OUSD Community** , **Media Contacts**

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**OAKLAND UNIFIED
SCHOOL DISTRICT**
Community Schools, Thriving Students

PRESS RELEASE

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Tuesday, February 8, 2022



Amani Griffin and Destiny Ndubuisi put the final touches on their meal on competition day as fellow interns prep in the background. Their meal of Jahita rice and peach cobbler would go on to win the competition at The OUSD Food Lab.

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The Central Kitchen, Education Center and Instructional Garden/Farm opened in Fall 2021

Oakland, CA -- The OUSD Central Kitchen, Education Center and Instructional Garden/Farm opened last fall in West Oakland, at the former Marcus Foster campus, fulfilling a decades-long District goal of creating an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable nexus of food and education to serve the OUSD community.

The Center, as it's also known, is an integrated hub of the new district-wide school food program network that connects nutrition and community programs at OUSD's schools, kitchens, and gardens. It houses the OUSD Nutrition Services program and central kitchen, providing fresh, California-sourced food for school meals resulting in improved nutrition for all District students. But the Center provides so much more than school meals.

"What we're able to offer are unique hands-on learning opportunities for students," said **Michelle Oppen**, Director of Programs at The Center. "Whether it's gardening activities, cooking demonstrations, internships, taste tests, or connecting the dots about agriculture and healthy living on our one-acre farm, our students are able to experience

everything around them first hand.”

In the first six months of programming at The Center, it has launched several programs that offer unprecedented learning opportunities. Here are four of them.

Student Advisory Council

Through The Student Advisory Council (SAC), students can actively engage in shaping both their own school food experience and the educational programming that takes place across the District. 25 students in grades 4 through 11 who represent the diverse OUSD population, take part in meetings, projects, and taste tests throughout the school year. SAC members have learned about school food systems, have become food critics during taste tests of potential new breakfast menu items, and continue to practice their leadership skills.



Members of the Student Advisory Council. For more information about the Student Advisory Council, [click here](#). For a video about last year's program, click [here](#).

Field Trips

This year, staff at The Center have started piloting field trips for third grade classrooms across the District and a small number of high school groups.

A “seed” theme permeates the third grade field trip, which aligns the experience to third grade curriculum and standards, particularly the Science (FOSS) Life Science Module: Structures of Life. Students rotate through various stations in The Center’s outdoor instructional garden, outdoor kitchen, and educational classrooms. Activities are led by Center program staff and FoodCorps Service Members.



Students also visit the Central Kitchen and learn about the school meal program, help set up “The Center Cafe” for lunch, and enjoy a pizza and salad bar meal provided by OUSD Nutrition Services and featuring items harvested from the onsite garden. A Journey of Pizza Tomato Sauce play and performance has been a recent addition to the trip. There have been 12 field trips so far, with 274 students visiting The Center.



Third graders from Laurel Elementary kicked off the very first third grade field trip with an opening circle.

“My students were so engaged,” said **Garfield Elementary** 3rd grade teacher, **Sean Gamboa**. “They were thrilled by the salad and their knowledge of the vegetables that they saw and worked with. I think they have developed an amazing appreciation for the environment and wholesome and healthy food that we can use to build upon over the rest of the year.”

Another Garfield teacher, **Kiana Pineda** exclaimed, “my students can't stop talking about how they know where their food is made, and that our school garden is like a mini central kitchen!”

The Center has also hosted two high school field trips so far this year. Students from **Castlemont's Sustainable Urban Design Academy** and **Dewey's Health & Fitness Pathway** came to The Center for a day of farm-to-table activities. They harvested items from the garden, made fresh pizzas in the pizza oven, and deepened their connection to and understanding of OUSD's food system.

Field trips will continue in the 2022-23 school year with exciting new additions and changes to the program thanks to feedback from students and teachers who have participated in the field trips so far.



***Chef David Isenberg** guided Castlemont students through pizza making during their field trip to The Center.*

Seed and Start

One remarkable feature of The Center is the District's own on-site greenhouse. Because of the greenhouse's expanded capacity we have been able to develop a robust Seed and Start Program that is offered to schools across

the District. School-site **Garden Stewards** (stipended school staff who commit to maintaining and engaging community in school site garden spaces) request seasonal and curriculum-aligned seeds and plant starts for planting, learning and harvesting at their school sites. These offerings are matched with the **OUSD School Garden Planting Calendar** and the **OUSD School Garden Toolkit**.



The items for order reflect seasonal and culturally diverse produce offerings that can be easily grown in the Bay Area and our schools. Center staff and **University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners** work together to curate and grow the plants, care for them, and assemble the seed and start requests. Our partner **Urban Adamah** also helps with supplying potting soil and providing some of our starts including tomatoes, eggplants, and peppers. We have served 57 OUSD schools - many of them, multiple times - and provided 1300 volunteer-assembled seed packets and almost 2700 plant starts so far this year!

Summer Internship: OUSD Food Lab

Last summer, The Center hosted 14 high schoolers for the first-ever OUSD Food Lab Internship. The program focused on an integrated approach to food systems, with students engaging in discussion about environmental justice through the Roots of Success curriculum, stewarding the Center garden and diving into culinary arts. The internship culminated with a **meal challenge**, where students planned and prepared meals they'd like to see on the school food menu.



Students worked on trellising in the garden, one of the many garden stewardship practices learned and taken on by interns during the internship.



Dewey students toured The Center, stopping to visit The Center's first farm animals: worms in the Common Compost vermicomposter.

“They cooked up their versions of Korean bibimbap, Salvadoran pupusas, and Vietnamese pho, as well as some fusion experiments, like a sushi-style burrito and Ndubuisi’s jollof-fajita rice, which the team termed ‘jahita rice.’” (Read more from the article in [Oaklandside](#)). Students reported leaving the internship with a newfound appreciation for the devotion it takes to grow and prepare delicious and nutritious food and newfound interest in the urban agriculture and culinary industries.

Nutrition Services is currently working to get the student-created meals served as part of the lunch menu and the program team to prepare plans for more internship opportunities for this summer.

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About the Oakland Unified School District

In California’s most diverse city, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is dedicated to creating a learning environment where “Every Student Thrives!” More than half of our students speak a non-English language at home. And each of our 80 schools is staffed with talented individuals uniting around a common set of values: Students First, Equity, Excellence, Integrity, Cultural Responsiveness and Joy. We are committed to preparing all students for college, career and community success.

To learn more about OUSD’s Full Service Community District focused on academic achievement while serving the whole child in safe schools, please visit [OUSD.org](https://www.ousd.org) and follow us @OUSDnews.