Culture Night Extended: A Digital Cookbook

Foothills Elementary School, Jeffco Public Schools

Submitted by Katy Evans, katy.evans@jeffco.k12.co.us

Each year, hundreds of families attended Foothills Elementary School's Culture Night to learn about one another through food, music, art, and storytelling. While participation had traditionally been strong, the school recognized an opportunity to broaden engagement by creating more accessible entry points for families who might not yet have felt ready to host a table or take on highly visible roles.

To expand participation, Foothills introduced a series of connected, classroom-based experiences leading up to Culture Night. The week prior, every classroom engaged in a read-aloud of *Let Me Fix You a Plate* by Elizabeth Lilly, a story that explored family, culture, and identity through food. Students then reflected on their own favorite meals through writing and illustration at developmentally appropriate levels. These pieces, featuring meals ranging from arepas to mac and cheese, and hush puppies to chocolate ice, were displayed throughout the hallways, transforming the school into a vibrant celebration of identity and belonging. This approach ensured that every student could "show up" in the event, even without attending or hosting a table. It also created natural opportunities for conversation, connection, and pride among students and families alike. Building on this momentum, families were invited to contribute a favorite recipe to a schoolwide digital cookbook. Recipes could be drinks, desserts, sides, or full dinners, hundred-year-old family traditions, or favorite weekday meals from a website. The resulting collection reflected the richness of the community and offered a lasting resource.

Staff and students responded enthusiastically to the classroom components, noting increased engagement, meaningful conversations, and a strong sense of belonging. Hallways filled with student work sparked ongoing dialogue and curiosity. While family recipe submissions were more limited than hoped, this revealed an important opportunity: intentional outreach, personal invitations, and clear examples could help lower barriers and support broader participation. Future efforts might also include more explicit promotion and opportunities for families to experience one another's recipes. Teachers could increase participation by including submissions as part of homework packets or projects.

By intentionally layering classroom experiences, at-home contributions, and community celebrations, Foothills expanded who could participate and how. Moving forward, the school plans to continue integrating inclusive, interactive pre-events to ensure that Culture Night remains not just well attended, but truly representative, collaborative, and rooted in the strengths of every family.