Economics Unit is “Kicked Up A Notch” through Community Partnerships

by Betty DiJulio Partnership Coordinator

“Order Up!”

Perhaps this is not a phrase one would expect to hear shouted out by a second grader during a study of economic systems.

But that’s only if one wasn’t in attendance at the grand openings of the Star Spangled Café, the Super Soup and Salad Café, or any one of the other three restaurants that opened recently in all second grade classrooms at Old Donation Center for the Gifted and Talented (ODC). These simulated restaurants-for-a-day marked the culmination of a nine-week economics unit, with cross-disciplinary connections to chemistry, nutrition, and technology.

Notable for many aspects, including effective integration of Community Partners in Education, this unit served up problem-based learning experiences in pursuit of answers to these essential questions:

What are some ways of acquiring goods and services and the advantages and disadvantages of each?

What economic decisions must be made in establishing and/or operating a business?

The map for this economics unit places economic systems at the center, with links to four key cornerstones: history, economic concepts, investing and business operations, including assembly lines and restaurants. A field trip to the ODC’s partner, CiCi’s Pizza - Haygood, helped students build their knowledge base about restaurant operation. In preparation for the trip, students analyzed the restaurant’s menu for overall appeal, noting the variety of foods offered, their prices and nutritional value. Students then composed a series of questions addressing the economic issues of supply and demand, wants and needs, and the roles and responsibilities of various personnel. At the restaurant, manager Kirk Jennings fielded questions posed by the students, who used his answers to help set up their own classroom restaurants.

Through a smorgasbord of activities, students came to recognize the interdependence of producers and consumers and of economic systems. Teachers used interest inventories to assess the theme for their restaurants, while class votes determined clever names for the businesses. Menu items, donated by parent volunteers, reflected student tastes, as well as nutritional value, while prices reflected food and other associated costs. Based on student preferences and corresponding rationale, teachers, a.k.a. restaurant “owners,” matched children to jobs such as host, bus boy, waiter, line cook, manager and cashier, while parent volunteers helped oversee the whole operation. Student-produced table tents and settings, menus, meal tickets and decorations created a tasteful ambiance. “Owners” divided their classes into A and B shifts, with each serving as the customers for the other, along with other invited guests: parents, school staff and other community members, who received “play” money to pay for their meals and tips. Restaurant “critics,” including members of the school’s cafeteria staff, offered feedback.

Supplemental audio-visual, electronic, and print resources further expanded students’ knowledge base about food and economics. For example, Judi Barrett’s Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs reinforced the concept of supply and demand in a humorous tale about the citizens of the town of “ChewandSwallow” who obtain their food from the weather. When the food becomes oversized and dangerous, the citizens are forced to leave their community. Class discussions, reflective responses, and journal writing provided a qualitative assessment of the unit, while student determination of profit provided one type of quantitative assessment.

The key ingredients in ODC’s recipe for success included innovative and enthusiastic teachers, strong curriculum, authentic assessment, parental participation, and the effective engagement of the community. “Toques-off” to second grade teachers Carolyn Jackson, Fran Hatzopoulos, Nancy Jones, Pam Knecht, Maura Ganther, and Anna Cassalia for “kicking it up a notch” with community partners!

Parent volunteers, staff and students are busy prepping good food at the Star Spangled Café. Second graders in Fran Hatzopoulos’s class were given the opportunity to learn how a restaurant operates "from the inside out."