

# SAN DIEGO STUDENTS ENJOY LOCAL FLAVORS

## ABOUT THE DISTRICT

San Diego Center for Children's Academy (SDCCA) is located in Southern California in San Diego County. The district provides day and residential services to students and follows the Common Core State Standards curriculum to support students on a diploma bound path for high school graduation. During the 2022–2023 school year, SDCCA served 199 students, of which 41.7 percent were eligible for free and reduced-price school meals.

## ACTIVITIES

- Sourced local tilapia and local dates for use in two new standardized recipes
- Conducted year-round gardening activities
- Facilitated culinary groups for residential youth
- Provided nutrition education through field trips for day and residential students



*Fish tacos topped with mango salsa*

## LOCAL INGREDIENTS

SDCCA chose to develop two standardized recipes. First, a taco recipe featuring local tilapia because fish tacos are served as a menu staple throughout San Diego County. Originating in Baja, Mexico, the fish taco was the perfect the fusion of Baja and San Diego flavors. The second recipe developed was a walnut date breakfast bar. The bar featured local dates, in honor of the British heritage of some of the students.

## RECIPE DEVELOPMENT

SDCCA first developed the fish recipe as a plated, crusted tilapia with a jalapeño dressing. However, the acceptance ratings among the youth were low. In response to the poor ratings, SDCCA looked for inspiration to transform their recipe – and they found it in the food trucks popular in communities throughout San Diego County. SDCCA reimaged their tilapia as a fish taco and it was met with great success; the recipe received a 100 percent acceptability rating.

SDCCA then turned their attention to a second recipe featuring local nectarines used in a dessert menu item. As with the first recipe, the nectarine crumble was also met with low acceptability. While the local ingredient was replaced with dates, the reimaged recipe was a success, with the Walnut Date Breakfast Bar receiving a 90 percent acceptance rating.



*Walnut Date Breakfast bar plated*

## NUTRITION EDUCATION

SDCCA provided field trips, garden group education, and culinary group experiences as part of their nutrition education.

Sixty middle and high school youth and twenty staff visited the Olivewood Garden Learning Center where they experienced hands-on learning about farm-to-table concepts. The youth participated in a healthy culinary class and watched a recipe demonstration. They also took a walking tour during which they picked and tasted fruits and vegetables. Key messages included the importance of buying local, recycling, sustainability, and water conservation.

Culinary group experiences were offered to the youth in the residential treatment programs to teach them about the importance of eating healthy food and farm-to-table concepts. The youth also learned knife skills and basic cooking techniques. One of the benefits was offering youth an outlet to participate in an educational group while learning a valuable life skill. Most of the youth were very excited about the culinary program.

**San Diego Center for Children's Academy**

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Garden groups were facilitated throughout the year to provide hands-on education about the origins of food. During the garden groups, youth planted seeds, tended to crops, and harvested herbs and vegetables for the Dietary Department to use. As a result, the youth gained an appreciation for the level work it takes to grow food for consumption. Residential youth were able to earn **Clark Cash** by working in the garden and becoming the garden's keeper.

Some of the successes of the gardening groups included the following:

- 1) Providing a calming, therapeutic outlet for youth to relax and to use their hands;
- 2) Seeing a seed grow to a plant that was then harvested and used in the meal program gave a sense of achievement.

As to be expected, SDCCA did face a few challenges, though not insurmountable, which included fending off critters that ate the plants and the fact that not all the youth were interested in gardening. Though SDCCA provided a variety of jobs, gardening was not a good fit for all, though enjoying the tasty new recipes was!



*Youth growing lettuce as part of the gardening experience*

*Recipes: Mango SoCal Street Fish Tacos  
Walnut Date Bar*

