

Elliott Test Kitchen embraces learning opportunities

The after-school program started several new programs this school year

By Julia Mericle
The Hawk Eye

FORT MADISON — When Kumar Wickramasingha opened Elliott Test Kitchen in 2015, he wanted to fill a hole he saw in Fort Madison's education system — a safe, dedicated space for students to complete and receive help with their homework.

"Because I truly think education is the next big crisis coming our way," said Wickramasingha. "Because we are still into 8 o'clock to 3 o'clock dedicated to education when the rest of the world is 8 a.m. to midnight."

Originally from Sri Lanka, Wickramasingha understands this cultural difference first-hand. His passion for education and love of cooking helped him to create his little part in avoiding that crisis.

In the 2016-17 school year, the Elliott Test Kitchen attracted more than 100 students. The students, from a variety of grades, come for free to focus on academic goals, while also learning to cook and eat healthy meals.

However, since the program — run under the nonprofit Test Kitchen Education Foundation — began, Wickramasingha has run into a challenge.

"When [the students] get here they have an awesome meal, so that food is going to keep motivating them to come. That has worked," said Wickramasingha. "But one thing that has not worked is 'what homework?' There is no such thing as homework anymore. That word is getting away from our dictionary and our day-to-day life."

During the 2017-18 school year, Wickramasingha saw this as an opportunity for alternative learning experiences. He got creative. High school students come Sunday evenings to study for the ACT and receive help with college applications, scholarship essays and FAFSA applications.

Younger students attend STEM programming, science fair practice, chess club, Spanish classes, math tutoring and reading programs, to name a few.

Wickramasingha lets his culinary skills shine. He admits the first question when the students arrive at 3:30 p.m. is "What's for dinner?" followed closely by "Can I cook?"

However, fueled by beliefs full of favorites like tater tot casserole and macaroni and cheese, there are many more questions to follow, about science, reading and math.

Brent Zirkel, associate principal at Fort Madison Middle School, helps at Elliott Test Kitchen and likes the new focus on middle school students. Wickramasingha said Elliott Test Kitchen averages about 70 middle-schoolers per week, and seven have even participated in the ACT prep program.

"We're trying to catch them when they're younger, and they are still forming those academic habits," said Zirkel. "Then we can help them carry that through and see the importance."

Wickramasingha makes that importance known, connecting students with professionals in the community to show them the careers their efforts can lead to.

It's a resource-filled workspace, offering children internet access



Elliott Test Kitchen founder Kumar Wickramasingha passes out samples of pork shoulder to students during a Mathlete program Feb. 21 for fourth-graders at the Elliott Test Kitchen in downtown Fort Madison. Area students under the tutelage of Krys and Jim Plate were learning about fractions. Following their lessons, everyone enjoyed the day's meal consisting of pulled pork shoulder, with a gravy, mac and cheese, cabbage and potatoes and an orange Jello cake for dessert. (JOHN LOVRETTA/THEHAWKEYE.COM)



Area students under the tutelage of Krys and Jim Plate learn about fractions during the Mathlete program for fourth-graders Feb. 21 at the Elliott Test Kitchen in downtown Fort Madison. (JOHN LOVRETTA/THEHAWKEYE.COM)



Ellie Huebner, 10, left, and Karley Plate, 10, work on a fractions with the help of high school math teacher Jim Plate during the Mathlete program for fourth-graders Feb. 21 at the Elliott Test Kitchen in downtown Fort Madison. (JOHN LOVRETTA/THEHAWKEYE.COM)

and laptop computers to work on.

"It helps me get a lot of work done because at home I don't have access to technology and stuff except for my phone,"

said seventh-grader Taegan Hamilton, who took part in the science fair practice program. "Here it is kind of quiet and it's nice to be able to work with the teachers

and ask them questions."

Elliott Test Kitchen has had a year of firsts. Students used their new cooking skills to make dinner for community members in need. The

about how much money they put into non-academic programs for their children and consider the importance of Elliott Test Kitchen's goal as well.

Wickramasingha gets fired up about when he sees academics put on a back burner to other programs, like sports.

"Nobody knows who won the science fair and what project they did, but everybody knows who scored 32 points in the basketball game," said Wickramasingha, who made sure those science fair winners had someone there cheering for them and giving the winners trophies.

Wickramasingha said Elliott Test Kitchen hosted an ACT prep program in Burlington last April at Ivy Bake Shoppe and Cafe in Burlington. After poor attendance, Wickramasingha credited the lack of interest to students' busy spring schedules.

He found success in Fort Madison hosting the ACT prep courses on Sunday evenings, and hopes another time might work in Burlington, even if he does not lead it.

"I have no interest in making this a business venture. It's my passion. If someone in Burlington feels value in this and wants to start up in Burlington, I'd flip over and help them," said Wickramasingha. "Because it's really needed, and this is one small way of getting our education back on track."



Left to Right: Dawn Jessup, Kimberly Pyle, Kim Delap, Alaina Mathews, Chance Oliver

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