

# A Case for Easier Access to Cleaner Water

Embedded in the heart of downtown Los Angeles within the Pico-Union community lies Equitas Academy #3. This kindergarten through fourth grade school is one of six charter schools within Equitas Academy Group.

The community of Pico-Union has a deep history – rich in culture and traditions from the vibrant people that live within the neighborhood. This area is known as a popular “first stop” for those who come to America. “Pico-Union is actually the first suburb of Los Angeles. It’s a very old community – it’s a huge wealth of culture and celebration. A lot of families will come here, get their bearings, and then either stay or move out of Los Angeles. So, it’s a community that sees people come and go, but it has deep roots in the Los Angeles community,” said Alaina Pariano, School Director of Equitas Academy #3. Those who put down roots in Pico build upon the cultural melting pot of this small community.



Roughly 90% of the students at Equitas Academy #3 speak English as their second language – Spanish is their primary language. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Pico-Union was the hot spot within Los Angeles, where the deadly virus ran rampant. During this time, schools were closed, and learning was done remotely – however, the school’s staff returned daily to pass out meals to every student. “We’ve served over 700,000 meals during the pandemic when we were shut down. While everyone was working from home, (staff) from the operational side made sure that we got up at five in the morning and had assembly lines to create meal kits for all of our kids,” said Miriam Jimenez, Operations Manager at Equitas Academy #3. “We did a drive thru for our families so they could pick up meals during the pandemic to ensure that even though the kiddos weren’t in the building with us they were still provided with healthy meals.”

While the school did all they could to ensure students had an educational and nutritious experience while remote learning, the impact of the pandemic hit the community incredibly hard. A devastating 80% of the K-4th grade students from Equitas Academy #3 lost an immediate family member to COVID-19.



“For my third graders, last year was the first year back from distanced learning. They basically missed out on kindergarten and first grade. Those are very formative, important years – with socialization, phonics, even learning how to read. We’ve noticed that they’re still working on some kindergarten skills here and there. They’re learning how to share, how to have empathy for each other, because they’ve lived in their little world at home where there’s not a lot of other kids, said Mr. Ortiz, third grade teacher at Equitas Academy #3.” Post-COVID, the role of teachers and staff became more important and demanding than ever. They were no longer just educators – they began wearing the hats of mom, dad, brother, sister, social worker, therapist, and more, all while trying to make up for the lost time spent outside of the classroom. “Now, post-COVID, there is a lot of focus on social emotional learning – working on our skills of interacting with each other and making a good environment for learning. We also want to make sure that we’re teaching to the benchmark in third grade, but I have to make things accessible for them because they missed out on some of those skills from kindergarten or first grade due to distanced learning,” said Ortiz.

**“While everyone was working from home, (staff) from the operational side made sure that we got up at five in the morning and had assembly lines to create meal kits for all of our kids.”**

---

*Miriam Jimenez, Operations Manager at Equitas*





Once students came back into the school, access to clean drinking water became critical. With COVID restrictions in mind, schools didn't allow students to use legacy water fountains. Manually activated products have an increased risk of spreading germs on their push bars and buttons – meanwhile young students often struggle to keep their mouths far enough away from bubblers, while still getting a drink of water. So, what did they do?

During the months following the return to school, Equitas used a water delivery company to deliver 5-gallon jugs of water to their school. The 5-gallon jugs were a massive pain point for the staff. From missed shipments, to the labor of delivering jugs to every classroom, the massive storage issue, and then the added burden of picking up the jug, flipping it upside down and installing on the dispenser – the jugs were not the right solution. When shipments were missed, Miriam and her team would load up the jugs on a cart, walk down the street to the local bodega, and fill the jugs themselves. With up to six jugs on a cart at a time, each cart would weigh more than 200 pounds as they would push the cart back up the hill into the school. In less than one school year, Equitas Academy #3 spent more than \$30,000 on clean water for their students and staff. “We were doing these water runs about twice a week. When we try to do reimbursements for anything you do need an itemized receipt; little bodegas like the store across the street do not offer an itemized receipt. A lot of the time I was paying for these water jugs out of pocket, which is honestly for our kiddos, so it does not bother me at all. But when you think about it over time, it adds up very quickly.”



Equitas needed a solution that was reliable and more cost-efficient, but would provide the students and staff with cleaner, healthier drinking water – whenever they need it. Elkay reached out to the team at Equitas to donate two filtered bottle filling stations to the school. Our ezH2O bottle filling stations provide a fresh drink of filtered water, with a hands-free experience – no push bar activation needed.

The teachers and staff are looking forward to the cost-savings and productivity gained from installing new bottle filling stations. The money that had historically been used on purchasing 5-gallon jugs of water will now be used toward more programs and experiences for the students, including field trips. Miriam and her housekeeping staff will be able to spend more of their time on facility-related priorities, rather than shuffling 5-gallon jugs throughout the school. The teachers are excited about improved focus in the classroom to help address lost learning.

**“A lot of the time I was paying for these water jugs out of pocket, which is honestly for our kiddos, so it does not bother me at all. But when you think about it over time, it adds up very quickly.”**

---

*Miriam Jimenez, Operations Manager at Equitas*



“I think the bottle filler will just make things so much easier, because it’s good water. It’s going to be right there. I’m going to be able to send them over to the bottle filler, they’ll refill their bottles, come back to the classroom, and they’ll probably have water for the rest of the day. I won’t have to send them out multiple times a day to get some sips of water from the fountain, which does get in the way of instructional time. If they miss five minutes in here by constantly going outside to get water they miss key things. When they get out of a concentration headspace, it does derail their thought process. Being able to fill water bottles and have them right there next to them is going to be a game changer,” said Ortiz.

Elkay’s relationship with the team at Equitas will continue, as we are eager to hear more about the impact of our bottle filling stations within their school. “If funds were not an issue I would say why hasn’t anyone done this years ago? Why hasn’t the state done this years ago,” said Jimenez. “Why isn’t this a regulation that the state can do for our schools to help our kids have safe drinking water and allow those funds to go toward something more fun or more rigorous for their curriculum. We’re just people, we just want clean water.”



**“Being able to fill water bottles and have them right there next to them is going to be a game changer”**

*Mr. Ortiz, third grade teacher at Equitas*