

## **The Farmers' Market Salad Bar Program**

"We never thought we would see the day when kids are clamoring for kohlrabi or daikon, but after they've tasted it at the salad bar programs, they want more and more," says Laura Avery, manager of the Santa Monica Farmers' Market. She is referring to a new program whereby local farmers' markets supply farm-fresh fruits and vegetables to school cafeterias. At district schools children are offered a fresh farmers' market salad bar as an alternative to the traditional hot lunch five days a week. "I can tell you," one sixth grader exclaimed, "that we are very happy!"

The farmers' market salad bar program is run by the Santa Monica Malibu Unified School District (SMMUSD) Food and Nutrition Services Department and the City of Santa Monica Farmers' Market. Many of the children affected are from low-income families where access to fresh produce may be limited. The school district has seen more than a 500% increase in kids selecting the salad bar choice once the district began buying fresh fruits and vegetables at the farmers' market rather than through local produce dealers. The program has evolved from a pilot program in one elementary school to a district-wide success story being implemented in all 14 schools, thanks to a strong lunchtime demand from students for fresh fruit and vegetables.

In 1997, Occidental College researchers launched a pilot program to encourage students to eat more fresh produce while simultaneously supporting local farmers. The high-fat, high-salt food school age children often eat have created a paradox: many children are overweight and/or undernourished and school food is often the only daily meal available to them. In the past, school food menus may not have emphasized sound nutrition. Food insecurity is a condition that far too many low-income children confront daily, both inside and outside the schools.

The salad bar is a particularly compelling idea, given indications that nutritional deficiencies may have a significant impact on learning capacity. School

food services often have become a political football between shrinking budgets, a reliance on low quality, commodity-based food, and the new shift toward privatized food services, which often emphasize fast-food type items.

According to Avery, "Kids pile their plates high with bright crunchy, juicy produce and often return for a second plateful. Nutritionally, the salad bar exceeds the USDA minimum requirements."

Rodney Taylor, SMMUSD food services director, says, "Serving nutritious meals that are also appealing to students encourages them to make healthy choices at an early age. Observing these good nutritional habits can help prevent a lifetime of serious health problems including obesity, diabetes, heart disease and cancer."

The items for the salad bar consist of what's in season, with many of the items picked the previous day. A typical week's menu will include two different kinds of fruit daily as well as four to six different kinds of vegetables. Since the program purchases directly from local farmers, items vary by season. There is an educational benefit as students become aware that certain foods only grow in the region during particular seasons. Students also learn about growing issues in a school garden and through farmers' market tours.

Taylor believes the salad bar program has paid for itself thus far. It costs the district just pennies per serving as compared to the hot lunch. The district's food budget pays for the market produce, but volunteers or others funded by federal grants bring the produce daily to the students at the salad bar.

Because of good volume, growers give bulk discounts. "We're supplying the district with organic strawberries at \$8 a flat which might sell at the market for \$12 a flat. It's a guaranteed volume and at a price the farmers are comfortable with," says Avery.

The Santa Monica School District spent \$23,400 on the salad bar program in the 1999-2000 school year. One of the 20 farmers sold \$4,260 worth of produce to the district, a new customer that had never shopped at the farmers' market. Sales are beneficial to the farmers even at or below wholesale price be-

cause they don't make an extra stop, don't have to make a hard sell and it's a standing order each week. "The farmers also enjoy knowing that they are nourishing and educating a new generation of consumers," Avery adds. "They figure that kids that start out eating good food will continue to eat good food."

### ***How do you start a salad bar program?***

The Santa Monica Farmers' Market was fortunate to have several supportive people to get it started: the director of Food and Nutrition Services for the district, the market manager, and SMMUSD food nutrition coordinator Tracie Thomas, who pulled it all together.

"The food services director for your school district is the first person to approach," Avery says. "In our case the director happened to have a son in the schools whom he was anxious to get on this program." Another requirement is access to a large volume and good variety of fresh produce — it takes a lot of produce to supply a salad bar daily for a school district.

With the help of grant funds, the market also sponsors a Chef in the Classroom program to partner with teachers interested in incorporating nutrition into their curriculums, even in elementary school.

*USDA grant.* Having helped to demonstrate the feasibility of the concept, Occidental College is now heading a national consortium of universities, school districts and non-profit groups to develop new "farm-to-school" programs in California, New Jersey, and New York and expanding nationally.

Funded by a \$2 million grant from the federal agriculture department, the farm-to-school project is an innovative effort to improve children's health and give small and medium-sized farms access to part of the \$16 billion school food services market. "This will enable us to provide the kind of outreach and training needed to help others create and institutionalize their own programs across the country," said Robert Gottlieb, director of Occidental's Urban and Environmental Policy Institute (UEPI).



Santa Monica Malibu Unified School District

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"We can envision farm-fresh food and gardens integrated into literally every school district in the country," added project co-director Michelle Mascarenhas. By expanding the market for local farm produce, farm-to-school programs can create a major new sales opportunity for family farmers as well as provide healthier food for school lunches and an effective means of educating children about nutrition, said Gottlieb.

For more information, see Occidental College's Pollution Prevention Education Research Training website at:

<http://www.oxy.edu/oxy/news/articles/farms.and.schools.html>.

[See also Resources, Chapter 12]

Similar salad bar programs have been operating in Berkeley and Santa Barbara schools. The Santa Barbara Farmers' Market approached a local school to establish a garden, applied for a grant, and the kids now grow food and come to the market. They also sell to the cafeteria which meets the rest of their needs at the market.

Kids notice fresh. This wave of the future may only be limited by the variety of products available locally. When highlighting the 5-A-Day program or simply hosting a school tour, notify farmers to have at least one item "on special" for kids. An apple or

Asian pear for a quarter starts the habit and gets an idea home. Fullerton, CA, has hosted children's tours where everyone receives 50 cents of coupons to redeem with farmers. Make sure they go home with a brochure. Work with the school nutritionist to incorporate farmers' market items and education into their program.



Vance Corum

*Kids love to leave their mark through a mural or tile project which can be incorporated into a market building or nearby wall.*