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## How a School Salad Bar Can Be a Learning Experience, Too

**November 28, 1999** | Robert Gottlieb and Michelle Mascarenhas | Robert Gottlieb is professor of urban and environmental policy at Occidental College. Michelle Mascarenhas is director of Occidental's Community Food Security Project

Picture this: Lunchtime for 900 students at Castelar Street Elementary in Chinatown, one of L.A. Unified's 430 elementary schools. Less than half the students grab fried tacos, while more than half line up for the farmers' market fruit and salad bar. These students get to choose from 10 different fruits and vegetables, including sliced Fuji apples, mandarin oranges, carrot sticks, broccoli spears, a combination of red leaf, romaine and iceberg lettuce and Fuyu persimmons. Some of the salad-bar lines are so long during lunch period that several students have to be sent to the hot-meal window where there are no lines.

Is this really happening? An LAUSD success story? Kids picking salad over fried tacos?

The Castelar school farmers' market salad bar is a pilot project. It was inspired by the extraordinary success of a similar program in the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District, which was launched two years ago and now serves eight schools, seven of them elementary. The market's fruits and vegetables come directly from regional farmers. Students can also choose from dairy, bread and protein items to meet U.S. Department of Agriculture nutritional requirements. Teachers and staff can shop the salad bar as well.

But why call this an LAUSD success story? Or a "healthy farms" program? Aren't we just talking salad? What does that have to do with education, so often defined by standardized test scores? Or a school's mission? Or even farm issues?

A farmers' market salad bar offers some invaluable lessons--and academic opportunities--for children and their schools. What kids eat affects how they learn. It's an issue of too few calories: When children go hungry, their attention span suffers. It's also an issue of too many of the wrong kinds of foods: When kids consume high-fat, high-sodium foods and high-sugar caffeinated drinks, it can impair their ability to concentrate. A soon-to-be-released study by researchers at the UCLA School of Public Health found that more than 50% of students at 14 LAUSD schools were obese or overweight because of a combination of eating the wrong kinds of foods and a lack of physical activity.

These findings are hardly aberrant. Obesity among school-age children has continued to climb in recent decades. But instead of focusing on the roles that food choice and availability play in obesity, we have intensified the search for more effective weight-loss pharmaceutical products.

The experience of the farmers' market salad bar shows that a "whole schools" approach that takes learning, experience, students' background and community into account can work best.

Focus groups we conducted in Los Angeles and Santa Monica indicated that salad bars would be popular at schools if taste, freshness, choice and variety determined content. Children involved in school gardens and

who had made field trips to farms or farmers' markets were far more receptive to eating fresh produce, including tasting things they had never tried before. They also were pleased when the salad bar reflected their cultural experiences.

Is this learning? Yes. Learning about food sources, how food is grown, crop diversity, seasonality and the food cycle all provide important academic opportunities. School gardens, farms and farmers' markets have been successfully integrated into a learning-by-doing curriculum and set of educational activities. But when preparation for standardized tests overwhelms all else, learning by doing becomes marginal to the school experience and an overload for teachers.

Food services are already treated as peripheral to the school mission and are primarily operated to generate sufficient revenue to cover costs. This has led to another set of disturbing trends: contracts with fast-food chains, selling soda and chips as snacks or developing exclusive contracts with brand-name junk-food processors for vending machines. By cutting off the cafeteria from the classroom and evaluating food services according to economic rather than nutrition objectives, the schools create a food-nutrition-learning disconnect.

But food services can and should be considered part of the school program. In Santa Monica, for example, Food Services, thanks in part to its farmers' market salad-bar experience, changed its name to Food and Nutrition Services.

Small farmers can also be a big winner in whole-school/farm-to-school programs like the farmers' market salad bar. Direct sales from farm to consumer--in this case, schools--provide a reliable source of income for small regional farmers, including organic growers who are primary participants in this and other similar programs. These sales also help preserve farmland at the urban edge.

The farm-to-school approach is catching on across the country. The USDA, in conjunction with the Community Food Security Coalition and other groups, has launched a nationwide farm-to-school initiative. California's own "garden-in-every-school" program has helped stimulate a USDA "millennium garden," designed to develop school gardens in hundreds of thousands of schools nationwide. The salad-bar program and similar initiatives have cut across class and racial lines as well.

When schools are forced to define performance by how effectively students fill in the boxes on standardized tests, we lose sight of the fact that children can learn from real-world experiences. If given the choice of fresh, nutritious and tasty food, students will not only come, but they will learn, and the whole school will benefit as well.

<http://articles.latimes.com/1999/nov/28/opinion/op-38288>