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Healthy Farms, Healthy Kids, Healthy Education

Nutrition plays a role in learning, yet too few children benefit from the fresh fruits and vegetables growing all around them. A group of community members is trying to change that.

May 21, 2000 PATRICIA McCART-MALLOY and MICHELLE MASCARENHAS

Earlier this year, a group of parents, school personnel and businesspeople gathered in Ventura to talk about schools. We weren't discussing how children learn at school, but rather what they eat there.

Why spend time talking about school lunches? The link between the cognitive processes and good nutrition, of course. Research shows that good nutrition is key to mental performance and development. During student achievement testing, students are uniformly encouraged to eat a good breakfast. But what about the rest of the day, and the rest of the year?

Good nutrition includes healthy servings of fruits and vegetables. And here in Ventura County, we are home to nearly 350,000 acres of farmland producing some of the sweetest strawberries, juiciest citrus and freshest broccoli (a crop that loses its nutrients quickly). Yet how many of our children benefit from the fresh fruits and vegetables that grow all around them? That's what we discussed.

We also discussed the consequences of bad nutrition. Although genetics plays a role in body weight and size, poor nutritional choices often lead to children being heavier than they otherwise would be. Obesity, defined as being 20% over median weight for age, increased 50% among children between 1991 and 1998. Obesity is a risk factor for, among other things, diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. Type II diabetes, a diet-related disease that used to appear primarily in adults, now is being diagnosed much more frequently among children.

A school environment filled with healthy, appetizing choices is an important part of developing a healthy lifestyle. You can't teach a child to do something simply by telling her. ("Eat five servings of fruits and vegetables every day.") She has to learn by doing. ("This tangerine is delicious!") We have seen many children delight in sampling new fruits and fresh vegetables at farmers markets. Wouldn't it be wonderful if they had that opportunity every day?

If you can't get the child to the farmers market, why not bring the farmers market to the child? Schools provide a wonderful opportunity to plant the seeds for lifelong learning by exploring ways to introduce children to healthier eating habits while teaching them about local agriculture. In Santa Monica, Los Angeles and Berkley, schools are doing just that. Schools in those districts have launched farmers market salad bars to use fresh fruits and vegetables in school lunches. They give children the opportunity to make choices and try a variety of tasty, healthy foods.

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At the meeting, hosted by the Community Alliance with Family Farmers, a statewide nonprofit group based in Davis, Ventura County parents, farmers and school food service personnel gathered to discuss the potential of featuring farm-direct produce in local schools. We also heard how farmers are beginning to sell direct to schools in Santa Monica, Los Angeles and Berkley. We heard that it takes much effort and cooperation among parents, farmers and schools, and that cost is a factor for both farmers and school districts. But we also established that the payoff, in terms of children making healthier choices, is worth both the effort and cost.

We talked about how, by working together, we can make a positive change in our schools. One parent offered to pick up produce from the farmers at the local farmers market and deliver it to the school district each week. A farmer offered his farm for field trips so that children can experience picking a ripe tangerine from the tree and tasting the fresh-picked sweetness.

In Ventura, we have begun to explore the possibilities. Later in May, a representative of the Ventura Unified School District will join a local farmer and district parent on a trip to see the model programs in Santa Monica. Inspired by the Santa Monica model, the Ventura Unified School District plans to work with the Community Alliance with Family Farmers toward the shared goal of making fresh locally-grown produce available to all the children throughout the district. During the 2000-2001 school year, they hope to implement pilot programs at a high school, middle school and elementary school. Parents and food service directors from other districts, including Ojai, have also expressed an interest in developing similar local purchasing programs.

This initiative will take working together to make change happen. Even with the support of district employees and the assistance of Community Alliance with Family Farmers, it will take the work of volunteers, parents and others from within the community to make this dream a reality. The payoff will be healthier farms, schools, communities and kids.

To find out more, contact Pat McCart-Malloy at malloypatricia@hotmail.com.

Patricia McCart-Malloy, a former health teacher, is raising her two young children in Ventura, where one of them attends Juanamaria Elementary School. Michelle Mascarenhas is director of the Community Food Security Project at Occidental College. She helped develop the Farmers Market Salad Bar Model in the Los Angeles region.

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