



HEALTHY CHILDREN, HEALTHY FARMS, HEALTHY FUTURE

By Aliye Aydin
Processor Certification Assistant

ON DECEMBER 1ST 2000, I entered the school cafeteria at Malcolm X Elementary School in Berkeley, accompanied by Jered Lawson, the Project Coordinator for the Food Systems Project in Berkeley. Immediately I was brought back to my days in the school cafeteria. The cacophony of sound coupled with kids whizzing by me at lightning speeds invoked a sense of chaos. We were just in time to catch the first wave of kids for lunch hour that Friday afternoon. I was there to “observe” the Food Systems Project (FSP) in action.

The Food Systems Project uses a whole systems approach to the study of food to link Berkeley Unified School District students, their families, the local community, and local family farms. Through their work in gardens, in preparing meals, and in health studies, students gain an understanding of the way in which their own eating and food choices impact the environment. The Project recognizes the school’s role, as part of the larger community, to promote family health, sustainable agriculture, and environmental restoration.

~quote from Working Systemically

The FSP started out of concern for our children’s health—the concern that every child in the Berkeley Unified School District has access to healthy food at an affordable cost. The project has many components,

including classroom education, hands-on gardening, fresh organic salad bars in the cafeteria, after-school snack programs, and field trips to local organic farms.

A full-service salad bar is one of the components of this project. For lunch, the students have a choice of either the hot lunch (corn dog, pizza, etc.) or a trip through the salad bar, where they get to pile their plates with fresh organic greens and carrots, seasonal fruit, and other items purchased mostly from organic farmers that sell at the local farmers’ markets. Also available are fresh local breads and natural salad dressings.

After chatting with Regina McKengal, the food service supervisor at Malcolm X Elementary, and watching her and her team interact with the children and prompt them to possibly compose a balanced salad plate, she invited us to join in and make our own salads. Jered and I decided to have a go at it. Our plates full, we ventured into the dining area to enjoy our lunch and talk to some kids, possibly about their impressions of the salad bar. I ended up conversing with Ryan, a fourth grader at Malcolm X Elementary. “Who are you?” he interrogated me as we carefully fit ourselves into the tables. We ended up talking about a variety of topics, but his impression of the salad bar was overall a positive one. He said he chose to eat it two or three times per week, and that the food was good. He liked the fact that he got to choose what he wanted to eat and pile it up on the plate himself.

After lunch, Jered and I took a tour of the school garden with a science teacher at the school, Larry Kass, who is active in teaching the kids about the connections between the garden and the food on the table. We also observed Rivka Mason digging in the garden with a group of 1st graders. The amount of dedication necessary to make projects like these work became apparent.

There are other components of the FSP that Jered was organizing at the time of my visit. One of these is to get organic hot lunch options (lasagna, pizza, and others) in the cafeteria. Another work in progress is organizing field trips to local organic farms, where the children can talk to the farmers and possibly see them in action. This also gives the farmers a chance to share their talents as caretakers of the soil, as well as providing a connection in the kids’ minds about where their food is coming from.

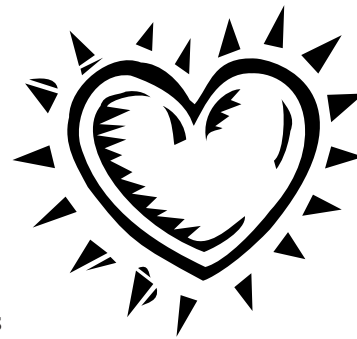
The FSP works in collaboration with schools in the Berkeley Unified School District to improve the food in the cafeteria. Four of the fifteen schools in the BUSD have salad bars. The role of the FSP has been to “get the ball rolling” at different schools by providing the salad bar, and hopefully the staff at the school will take the initiative to continue to improve the food in the cafeteria.

The after-school snack program has 10 schools participating in the Berkeley Unified School District, which consists of providing kids with fresh organic fruit and organic apple juice.

The FSP is a project of the Center for Ecoliteracy in Berkeley. Also born out of the FSP is the BUSD Food Policy, which is composed of 12 goals and 12 strategies designed to “...promote family health, sustainable agriculture and environmental restoration.”

The money essential to funding a project like the FSP has come from a few different sources. The FSP is funded by the USDA’s Community Food Security Project Grants. Another source of funding is a grant from the California Nutrition Network—the money from which goes directly to the schools. The FSP helps the school district secure this grant, which helps fund the salad bar, nutrition education in the classroom, cooking classes, and the Farm Field Trip Coordinator Position.

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WHO CARES?

Projects like the Berkeley Food Systems Project have a lot to offer CCOF farmers, supporters of organic agriculture, and the sustainability of our future food supply. One of the major benefits for farmers is direct marketing. Organic farmers have the chance to secure customers and income by supplying to the Berkeley Unified School District.

Understanding how our food choices can impact the environment can promote understanding of other relationships in life. Teaching kids how *now* relates to *later* (i.e., the cycle of life) is illustrated with the complete circle of classroom education to application in the cafeteria to composting scraps to digging in the dirt in the garden to harvesting food and back to the table again.

Programs like the FSP nurture organic farms and farmers by helping ensure a consumer. The health and bodies of the individuals participating in eating healthy food are also being nurtured, as well as mental growth by what kids learn in the garden about growing food and in the classroom about taking care of their bodies. The FSP helps ensure a future harvest by teaching kids, who in turn teach their families, that supporting organic farms now is crucial to sustaining the future of organic farming. Teaching kids *now* about health and nutrition helps ensure that the future will include the prevention of disease and maintenance of a healthy body, which ensures a better quality of life. It teaches kids *now* about possibilities for future work/career that they did not even know existed, being a farmer, being a gardener, being a health practitioner, or being an advocate of sustainable living. It helps lift morale — we're doing something "good" in this world that will help me out and those to come...


Just think about how different things would be for Bay Area farmers if every school in the BUSD chose to buy their ~~food from local organic farmers.~~

Unfortunately, this is not today's reality. School districts at this time cannot afford to pay what the farmers need and deserve. The FSP works to address these discrepancies by seeking funding from outside sources, or possibly more money from the USDA. It has been learning how to balance, to buy some food organic and locally, and still get other food from traditional sources. Hopefully in the future, with necessary funding, the amount of food from local organic farmers will increase.

Implementing a project as comprehensive in scope as the FSP has not necessarily been easy. There are a lot of key players — parents, garden coordinators, food service supervisors and workers, teachers, community members, and the kids themselves — that affect the success of this project, and coordinating with everyone effectively can, at times, be tricky. However, through the hard work of many over past years, the Food Systems Project in Berkeley has and will continue to be successful in its goals, and hopefully set a model for those looking to initiate something similar in their own community.

For more information, contact Jered Lawson at the Food Systems Project at: 510-548-8838 or visit their website: www.foodsystems.org

Other helpful sites:

<http://www.berkeleyfood.org>
www.ecoliteracy.org 

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CUSTOM POND LINERS

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~~e-certification is to streamline the business process of CCOF by allowing multiple people to access files without requiring the mailing of paper files. Henry thought it might be helpful in meeting USDA requirements, as the e-cert program can require that all boxes be checked when required so that no incomplete reports can be submitted. Henry will be working with Sean Feder, Inspection Operations Director, to create useful e-documents that will allow inspectors to complete work via the Internet. House is currently working on an interface that will allow inspectors to work through the existing system, possibly through a web site protected by a security system. This entire interface would then feed into the master database. The Board requested that Henry provide a timetable for implementation.~~

~~Nearing the end of this lengthy and important meeting, the Board decided that with holidays and industry events occurring on several weekends in May, the next meeting will take place in Sacramento on Saturday, May 5th. The CSC will meet the day before on Friday, May 4th.~~

~~The regular meeting then ended, and the Board went into executive session to review the evaluations of the Executive Director, Brian Leahy. The new Secretary, Gay Timmons, keeps minutes and motions of this portion of the meeting.~~

~~Ann Miller of Harris Ranch Inn and Keith Proctor of the CCOF Statewide Office assisted Kurt Quade and the CCOF leadership in preparing for this important three-day meeting of certified and supporting members from around the state.~~

~~Certified members who would like detailed information about this Board Meeting, please contact your Chapter Board Representative. Supporting members may contact Keith at the Statewide Office for more information, toll free at 888-423-2263, ext. 12, or keith@ccof.org~~ 