

Healthy Farms, Healthy Students: Farm to School in California

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Farm to School?

Farm to School programs connect schools with local farms. Farm to School programs impact the dietary choices of children by providing healthier options in school cafeterias and through education that connects the food in the cafeteria to farms and health. Schools procure and include farm fresh foods, including fruits and vegetables, on their menus through salad bars, meals and snacks. Farm to school programs also incorporate nutrition based curriculum and provide students with experiential learning opportunities through farm visits, cooking demonstrations, gardening and recycling programs. These programs give farmers access to a new market through schools and allow them to participate in programs designed to educate kids about local food and agriculture.

How many farm to school projects are there in California?

We estimate that as many as 100 schools in 20 school districts in the state have farm to school projects. Farm to school has taken root in school districts throughout California, from Ventura and Santa Monica-Malibu in the south to Davis, Healdsburg, Ukiah and Chico in the north of the State.

How can Farm to School improve student health?

With more than a quarter of California's kids being overweight, and almost half being unfit, there is an urgent need to educate children and influence their eating habits and lifestyles. Only 21 percent of California children ages 9-11 eat the recommended minimum five servings of fruits and vegetables per day. Farm to School programs are specifically designed to overcome the stereotypes surrounding "soggy" school vegetables. The local and seasonal produce Farm to School projects buy is ripe and fresh, making it more flavorful than most fruits and vegetables which are often picked slightly under-ripe for the purposes of transportation and storage. Kids will make healthy choices if the healthy snack is not a compromise in flavor. This palate education helps children form healthy habits now that will last throughout their lives.

Studies of several Farm to School programs in California show that more students participate in school meal program when farm fresh products are on the menu. In fact, school lunch participation rivals that of pizza day in some schools. Kids choosing farm to school options eat significantly more servings of fruits and vegetables (3-3.5 servings per salad bar lunch as compared to 1 serving per hot meal in the Davis Unified School District, for example). Students who choose Farm to School meals also waste less food than their peers eating hot lunches.

California Food and Justice Coalition

PO Box 209, Venice, CA, 90294 • 310-822-5410 • FAX 310-822-1440

How can Farm to School help farmers?

Family farmers in California and across the nation face a continuous struggle to stay on the land. Thousands of small farms fail every year, hurting farm families and rural economies. The state's schools represent a large, untapped market for California farmers. Schools and universities spend hundreds of millions of dollars every year buying food for their meal programs. Farm to School programs are starting to channel some of these food dollars to local farmers. In just 3 months, the Ventura Unified school district purchased \$40,000 of locally grown fruits and vegetables. Money paid to nearby farmers is much more likely to be spent in the surrounding economy. Participating farmers also feel pride in contributing to the health and educational mission of local schools.

How much does it cost to start and run a Farm to School Program?

Start up costs for Farm to School programs can include the one-time expense of acquiring food preparation, storage, and serving equipment. Recent studies of new farm to school salad bars in the Ventura and Davis School Districts found start up costs to range from \$2000 to \$3500 dollars at each school or central kitchen site. These two programs involved full service salad bars; smaller scale Farm to School programs would cost significantly less to launch.

The ongoing costs of Farm to School Programs involve added labor costs of preparing and serving fresh produce. The potentially higher prices for some locally-procured items is usually allayed because farm-to-school programs focus on what is in season making the price competitive with standard distributors. Associated educational programs, trips, and events can also add to the budget.

If students are serving themselves at a salad bar, how can we be sure they are getting a balanced meal?

Ventura Unified School District found that by combining the introduction of fresh farm products in the cafeteria with nutrition education in the classroom, students chose healthy meals 75% of the time, compared to 46% before the educational component was introduced. Existing Farm to School programs also have adults (cafeteria staff or parent volunteers) supervise students who choose a salad bar lunch. The adults ensure that all students take an appropriate mix of vegetable, protein, and dairy items, and do not use too much salad dressing. This approach ensures the best of both worlds: students feel empowered through being able to serve themselves, while the supervision guarantees students get a healthy selection.

Why focus on local produce?

Students should certainly be offered more fruits and vegetables, regardless of the source. Farm to School programs have prioritized partnerships with local farmers because these connections bring added educational and health benefits. Because local produce can be served fresh from the farm, it is more likely to appeal to students. In the Santa Monica- Malibu Unified School District participation in salad bars jumped five fold when the District switched from standard salad bars to a Farmers Market Salad Bar program. Local farm connections also deepen students' appreciation for food and agriculture. Eating locally sourced produce becomes part of the educational framework that turns kids on to healthier food options.

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