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Community Food Project (CFP)

Fresh Food Program Promotes Healthy Eating Habits Among Children

by Stacy Kish, CSREES

Communities across the nation are fighting the increased incidence of childhood obesity and Type II diabetes. With funding from USDA's Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES), a group in Illinois is promoting environmental sustainability and healthy eating habits in the youngest Americans. >>

Gary Cuneen founded the advocacy group Seven Generations Ahead (SGA) in 2001, located in Oak Park, Ill., to find local solutions to global environmental problems. The group offers a comprehensive "farm-to-school" program called Fresh from the Farm.

"Fresh from the Farm is very focused on promoting healthy eating habits among children," Cuneen said. "We're trying to connect children to the earth and the source of their food, and in the process, teach them

the link between nurturing their bodies with healthy food and nurturing the environment through growing food in ecologically healthy ways."

Healthy, sustainably grown food items are not marketed to children as effectively as fast food items, which have limited nutritional value. Seven Generation's Fresh from the Farm program reconnects students, parents, and teachers in the Chicago metro area with the joy, value and importance of eating a well-balanced and healthy diet.

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Right: McAuliffe Elementary student shows off a basket of tomatoes she picked at the Prairie Crossing Organic Farm.

Credit: Christina Luongo



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Above: Lozano student proudly holds a carrot she picked on a recent farm visit to the Green Earth Institute Organic Farm.

Credit: Anna Barnes

The group teaches children the health and environmental benefits of eating fresh, locally grown and organic food. This is accomplished through nutrition education. The students are exposed to fresh fruits and vegetables at weekly tastings and experience the joy of food during hands-on activities like planting, harvesting and composting on the farm. The healthy eating habits developed during the program are carried over into lifelong healthy eating habits.

Recent program evaluations show that students' knowledge about healthy eating and locally grown foods has increased significantly, and parents and students are reporting greater awareness about the importance of eating fresh fruits and vegetables and are reporting increased consumption of healthy foods as well.

In addition to educating students, the Fresh from the Farm program offers teacher training and parent education. Teacher training is aligned with Illinois education standards. Teachers are provided nutrition education and information on curriculum activities centered on organic food, global food traditions and learning to enjoy food with the five senses. The program also hosts Parent-Child Healthy Eating Nights. These events bring children and parents together to sample healthy food choices. The parents also receive valuable information on health trends, nutrition information and healthy eating habits in the home.

Fresh from the Farm is a resource to connect school districts with local farmers. Fresh from the Farm's

The Community Food Project promotes projects that inspire leadership and active community involvement. These projects foster relationships that benefit all participants well beyond the funding cycle.

procurement specialist works with local school districts to bring local, fresh produce to school lunch tables, and supports menu development and marketing and publicity strategy development.

In collaboration with the Oak Park River Forest High School Food Service, the Fresh from the Farm program has piloted healthy school lunch fundraisers to encourage the incorporation of healthy vegetables, fruits and grains in the Oak Park District 97 elementary and middle school lunch program.

The healthy pilot lunches were so well received by students and parents that the pilot has been incorporated into the district's school lunch program, which now incorporates healthy lunch offerings with whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables and occasional offerings of local and sustainably raised produce.

CSREES funded this research project through the Community Foods Project program. Through federal funding and leadership for research, education and extension programs, CSREES focuses on investing in science and solving critical issues impacting people's daily lives and the nation's future. For more information, visit www.csrees.usda.gov. ■

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