

By Dean Houghton

Link to the

lunchroom

Homesteaders are finding ways to bring their healthy foods to schools

Most days find Erynn Smith tending vegetables on a 5-acre plot of land just outside of Santa Paula, Calif., but on this early spring day, she is teaching class. Smith is behind the teacher's desk in a Ventura County elementary school, working an overhead projector as she introduces eager young minds to the world of food and farming.

At the end of the session, she passes out samples of homegrown carrots for the kids to taste. "Let's have a show of hands," Smith says. "Give a thumbs-up if you like these carrots." Immediately, all 15 students give a thumbs-up sign.

Farm to school. It's another victory for the farm to school movement. An increasing number of schools are sourcing local foods for their school lunch programs, filling tummies with fresh and nutritious food. But they don't stop there. They add educational programs that build on the theme by introducing students to food, farming, and nutrition.

October is Farm to School month, designated by an act of Congress in 2010. "Farm to school programs offer a way to improve child nutrition, support local economies, and educate children about

Left: Elementary school students try grilled vegetables in a Missouri taste test. **Below:** In California, Erynn Smith provides fresh, local vegetables as well as classroom lessons.





Above: Missouri students learn about the importance of sunshine on a trip to an area farm. **Left:** Lorin Fahrmeier says field trips can help kids connect with a community's agriculture.

“We demonstrate the life cycle of food for kids who visit, starting from seed and going to the table.”
—Lorin Fahrmeier



where food comes from,” says Deborah Kane, who is national director of USDA’s Farm to School Program. “There is a lot at stake. One-third of the nation’s children now are overweight or obese, and too few get enough fruits and vegetables. One benefit of bringing in local products is that kids get the chance to try new foods and, as a result, are more likely to consume additional fruits and vegetables.”

Local food is quite a change for the school lunch program, which has long been the butt of jokes about Tater Tots and mystery meat. In Missouri, Lorin Fahrmeier is out to prove that school food can be cool food. She serves as coordinator for the Uni-

versity of Missouri Extension project called Farm to Institution. “We can grow a wide variety of fruits and vegetables in this state, and schools are looking for local and seasonal foods for their school lunch programs,” Fahrmeier says. “It is my job to marry the producer and the consumer.”

She also gets her hands dirty, working with her husband, Bret, on their 10-acre homestead near Lexington, Mo. The couple also helps out on Bret’s family operation, Fahrmeier Farms, which grows local foods for markets in the Kansas City area.

Take a tour. Fahrmeier Farms opens its doors to school children who participate in tours to learn how food is grown. “We demonstrate the life cycle of food for kids who visit,” Lorin says, “starting from seed and going to the table as a consumable product.” Kids go from station to station in the farms’ greenhouses, learning about the importance of sunshine and nutrients in making wholesome local food. “There is a lot of value in being able to tell your story, especially if you can make it educational



at the same time,” Fahrmeier adds.

Tours can be an educational complement to activities taking place in the school cafeteria, says USDA’s Kane. “We like to see kids get a chance to visit a farm and interact with the men and women who grow the food that is being purchased locally,” she says. “When I visit a classroom, I like to ask kids to raise their hands if they have a doctor. Most raise their hands. I ask if they have a dentist, and again I see hands going up. Then I ask, ‘Do you have a farmer?’ It would be great to see them raise their hands because you gave them the opportunity to meet the person who grows their food.”

Spreading the word about food and farming is a big part of the Healthy Schools Project in California’s Ventura County Unified School District. This effort goes beyond simply purchasing Farm to School produce; a different local fruit and vegetable are designated for the Harvest of the Month, and a local farmer is selected for a Farmer of the Month profile, highlighting their operation.

“We do a monthly taste testing in the classroom,” says Alise Echele, a registered dietitian for the district. “We also offer each Harvest of the Month fruit, vegetable, and recipe at lunch on our farm to school salad bars. Of course, we also en-



Left: Alise Echele incorporates local foods into a Farm to School salad bar.

courage students to try them at home, as well.”

Echele calls on Erynn Smith and other local growers to provide a Farmer in the Classroom experience for kids. Smith serves as director of education for The Abundant Table, a sustainable, working farm. Under a program called Join the Farm, The Abundant Table offers Farm to School produce as well as farm education and field trip opportunities.

“We promote healthy eating, good nutrition, and a greater connection to the diverse agriculture industry in the county,” she says. Smith, a Ventura County native, has previous teaching experience. That experience allows her to deliver her message



Above: Rick Turner grills a variety of fresh vegetables and serves them up to an audience of elementary school kids.



Left: Colorful and locally grown, these lettuce leaves provide valuable nutrition.

about farms and food in an entertaining and easy going style. “It’s important to reach kids early,” she says. “They are forming nutrition habits that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.”

That’s an opinion shared by Rick Turner, director of culinary development for Opa! Food Management. Opa! is a Missouri company that specializes in serving the nutritional needs of K-12 school districts. Turner often dons a chef’s jacket as he visits schools, grilling items ranging from fresh asparagus to portabello mushrooms and offering them to elementary students in a taste-testing session.

“Elementary kids are still reachable,” he says. “They haven’t formed life habits yet. We don’t reach them with everything we offer in our taste tests, but I am amazed to see how well first- and second-graders accept healthy fruits and vegetables.”

Opa! partners with school districts to tailor a child nutrition program that meets a local community’s needs. “Then we incorporate locally grown farm-fresh fruits and vegetables,” Turner points out. “The final touch is our scratch cooking.”

Business building. Opa! also serves as a wholesaler, sourcing local foods from farmers. Sometimes overlooked in the Farm to School movement is the fact that local food provides an emerging market for homesteaders and small-scale farmers who may be looking to sell their produce.

The USDA’s first Farm to School Census, conducted in the 2011-2012 school year, found that 44% of school districts in the U.S. have a Farm to School program in place—and another 13% said they intend to launch such a program soon.

That adds up to a significant market. USDA estimates that schools spent \$385 million on local foods in 2011-2012, with more than half of the participating school districts indicating that they plan to spend even more on local food in the future.

Growers don’t have to be a giant agribusiness venture to provide local food to schools. Lorin and Bret Fahrmeier recently planted 2 acres of blackberries on their homestead, figuring part of their production might end up in local school cafeterias.

USDA officials also point out that schools define “local food” as they choose, and it might include the wheat in the pizza crust, the turkey in the sandwiches, or the cheese in the quesadillas.

Reaching out to students also is important. A farmer of any size can help kids by offering to conduct a classroom session, host a visit to their farm, or perhaps serve as a classroom pen pal. More ideas for how to get involved are available by visiting farmtoschool.org, the website of the National Farm to School Network.

The USDA’s Kane points out that even small steps can help boost agricultural literacy. “School gardens also can help complement efforts to bring local foods to the cafeteria,” she says. “Gardening may involve something as small as a Dixie cup with some soil in the bottom. A child can plant a pea and watch it grow. The more opportunity that kids have to plant, tend, and harvest the items you are encouraging them to eat, the greater the chance they will pick it up when they see it on the cafeteria line.” ■