

## Year-old program succeeds in getting more local produce to school children

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Wednesday was watermelon day, and Kevin Mosequeda-Flores made sure he got his.

The Korematsu Elementary School fourth-grader was on the frontlines of a noontime blitzkrieg of the school's lunch room.

First, Kevin attacked the salad bar, loading up with five slices of watermelon before bolting to the hot food table to grab ravioli and a burrito. Then, off to the stand-alone fridge for chocolate milk before — bing — punching in his code and then — zip — out the other door to find a seat outside.

The kid was in and out in 60 seconds. Tops.

"The watermelon's good," he explained out on a bench where he sat to eat with friends.

That's the kind of reaction Davis school officials want to hear one year after launching a lunch program designed to put fresh, locally-grown produce on students' plates.

Last year, locals sparked the Davis Farm to School Connection when they voted to tax themselves \$70,000 each year.

That money bought salad bars, produce to fill them and training to teach school cooks how to turn the fruits and veggies into meals. Korematsu's Wednesday menu read like one from a high-end locavore restaurant, featuring cherry tomatoes from Everything Under the Sun in Winters, rainbow chard from Capay Fruits and Vegetables and watermelon from Vierra Farms in West Sacramento.

Kids eating fresher, tastier produce benefits everyone, said Gail Feenstra, a food systems analyst with the UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program. The extra money boosts area farmers, the district scores some good publicity and the students get healthy meals while learning good eating habits for the long-term.

"This is an opportunity to educate their taste buds for the future," Feenstra said.

More than one-quarter of the fresh fruits and vegetables eaten by Davis students last year came from local growers within 250 miles, according to a report released last week by Feenstra's program. The 20-page report highlights some of the program's successes while pointing out challenges that have, and continue to, stifle the project.

Having 27 percent of your produce come off local farms is "pretty phenomenal," especially since it's a 21 percent jump over the previous year, Feenstra said. But, Feenstra adds in her report, the district faces a self-imposed goal of pushing that to 60 percent next year.

An unreliable distribution system challenged the district last year. "The biggest challenge," the report says, "is getting the product they want when they want it and in the quality and quantity needed."

Schools across the country are starting similar programs and facing similar problems. One near St. Paul, Minn. started contracting with farmers before the growing season to guarantee so many acres of a certain crop. The contract guarantees the farmer a stable income and the school a steady stream of fresh food.

"That's a good thing," Feenstra said, but "I'm not sure we've gotten to that point yet."

Goals for this year include increasing the amount of produce coming into the schools now that one-time equipment costs are out of the way, continuing to train cooks and expanding outside fruits and vegetables to other crops like rice, grains and dairy.

Educating kids about where and what they eat is also important, Feenstra added. She wants them to learn early on that, when it comes to lunch, "it's much more than just packaged fuel that you get mid-day."

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