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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Pittsburg Unified School District Receives 2015 California Food for California Kids Innovation Award

BERKELEY, CALIF., October 20, 2015 ... Matthew Bellasco, director of nutrition services at Pittsburg Unified School District, today was presented with a [2015 California Food for California Kids Innovation Award](#) for his district's leadership in creating a six-system [California Thursdays](#) collaboration across Contra Costa County. The biennial award was presented by the Center for Ecoliteracy.

"We are privileged to honor the great work of entrepreneurial leaders like Matt Bellasco," **says Zenobia Barlow, executive director of the Center for Ecoliteracy.** "Together, these six Contra Costa County districts serve 184 schools and over 105,000 students, crafting more than 15 million meals a year. That is tremendous collective leverage to help improve student health and academic achievement with delicious, freshly prepared meals made with California grown food."

In addition to Pittsburg Unified, it includes **Antioch Unified, Brentwood Union Elementary, Mt. Diablo Unified, Oakley Union Elementary and West Contra Costa Unified School Districts.** Bellasco's revolutionary collaboration provides county schools with more purchasing leverage, opening up doors to a broader menu of quality farms and local producers, more than three times as many as before.

Belasco believes that leading by example is the best way to encourage innovation among school districts. "We all recognize that we want to serve better food to our kids," **says Belasco.** "I wanted to make us an innovative county so that other districts can see that this type of collaboration is indeed possible. And although it takes work, anything is possible – especially when you work together."

The project's collaborator initially sought to support local families and the local economy, but eventually realized that it also brings surprising environmental benefits. "We have a smaller carbon footprint now because we're not driving trucks across the country to bring the same food that we can produce here," Bellasco says. "There are countless side benefits that only appear when you purchase locally and focus your energies right here in California."

The [Center for Ecoliteracy's California Food for California Kids initiative](#) provides resources and inspiration for incorporating fresh, seasonal food in school meals, preserves the environment, promotes local economies and agriculture, and teaches students where their food comes from and



Front: Vince Cangin; Natomas Unified; Matthew Belasco, Pittsburg Unified; Jennifer Girard, Monterey Unified; Nancy Rostomily, Lodi Unified. Rear: Adam Kesselman and Zenobia Barlow, Center for Ecoliteracy. Not Pictured: Harold Sullins, Hemet Unified.

how it reaches their table. Its signature program, California Thursdays, is a collaboration between the Center and a network of school districts to serve healthy, freshly prepared meals made with California-grown food.

The California Food for California Kids Awards was presented to five school districts at a ceremonial dinner in San Diego (left). Learn more [here](#).

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Editor's Note: Images, fact sheets and other materials on the California Thursdays program are available at www.californiathursdayspr.org.

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Natomas Unified School District Receives 2015 California Food for California Kids Innovation Award

BERKELEY, CALIF., October 20, 2015 ... Vince Caguin, coordinator of nutrition services at Natomas Unified School District, today was presented with a [2015 California Food for California Kids Innovation Award](#) for his district's leadership in extending their [California Thursdays](#) program to include summer meals. The biennial award was presented by the Center for Ecoliteracy.

"We are privileged to honor the great work of entrepreneurial leaders like Vince Caguin," says **Zenobia Barlow, executive director of the Center for Ecoliteracy**. "So many community partners came together to celebrate summer meals and experience how fresh and tasty they can be when done right. Natomas is leading the way for schools across the state to increase participation in summer meal programs, and improve their quality, through California Thursdays."

Natomas Unified piloted a project designed to serve healthier, freshly prepared meals made with California grown food as part of their free summer food service program, in a joint effort with the US Department of Agriculture, California Department of Education, and the Center for Ecoliteracy.

"The greatest thing about summer meals and our California Thursdays collaboration is that summer is the peak season for farmers," **Caguin explains**. He adds that farmers often call him asking if he can use their bounty of California peaches or apricots.

The program is popular with parents, too. Caguin says they often thank him for serving summer meals because the program has transformed their grocery shopping lists. "The kids are finally asking to eat vegetables, taco salad and fruit parfaits at home," he says.

The district hosted a Farm to Fork Summer Meal Celebration at the South Natomas Community Center on July 23rd. It was a huge success. Caguin originally estimated an attendance of 200-300 people, more than 700 were served.

"It's a great opportunity to provide the residents of Natomas with fresh, locally grown, nutritious food," he says "Our work encourages them to visit parks, libraries and community centers, and connects them to the people in their community who grow, cook and educate them about the food they eat. That is a lot to come out of a school meal!"

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Monterey Peninsula Unified School District Receives 2015 California Food for California Kids Innovation Award

BERKELEY, CALIF., October 20, 2015 ... Jennifer Gerard, director of nutrition services at Monterey Peninsula Unified School District, today was presented with a [2015 California Food for California Kids Innovation Award](#) for her district's "Bay2Tray" local seafood procurement program. The biennial award was presented by the Center for Ecoliteracy.

Gerard worked with local fishers to identify a new protein source: Grenadier, a by-catch that is usually discarded. This light and flaky fish made its way into the lunchroom in various forms: fish tacos, a chipotle-fish and cilantro-lime rice bowl, and fresh fish & chips. Students are responding enthusiastically.

"We are privileged to honor the great work of entrepreneurial leaders like Jennifer Gerard," says **Zenobia Barlow, executive director of the Center for Ecoliteracy.** "And, thanks to the [California Thursdays](#) network, these innovative ideas are 'catching.' Oakland Unified has also begun serving grenadier in school meals, and both the program and its unlikely centerpiece made [front-page news](#)."

The idea for Bay2Tray began when Gerard noticed something problematic in her district. The students looked out over the Monterey Bay each day and then went back to the cafeteria for lunch to eat frozen fish sticks from who knows where. "It's a disservice to our fishing community," **Gerard says.**

The change in menu also brought out a change in the students. "When we serve higher-quality food, the kids are more respectful waiting in line," Gerard explains. "I don't know if it's because they feel more respected or if better food simply demands a certain level of respect."

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Lodi Unified School District Receives 2015 California Food for California Kids Innovation Award

BERKELEY, CALIF., October 20, 2015 ... Nancy Rostomily, director of nutrition services at Lodi Unified School District, today was presented with a [2015 California Food for California Kids Innovation Award](#) for her district's [California Thursdays](#) community engagement efforts. The biennial award was presented by the Center for Ecoliteracy.

“California Thursdays is a great way to connect students with their food,” **says Rostomily**. “Now students know that the district is serving them real food, and they can finally put a name or face to those who produce their meals.”

Rostomily and her team have engaged the wider Lodi community in their farm-to-school events, creating a model for new districts joining the California Thursdays network. She invited the school board, staff, parents, community partners and local farmers to a big California Thursdays kickoff. A dozen California vendors, including General Produce Co., Teasdale Beans, Pacific Coast Producers, County Fair Pickles, Foster Farms and Corto Olive Oil, helped educate students on their food's provenance. Taking it one step further, the entrepreneurial Rostomily created a full complement of marketing materials, including truck wraps, lawn signs, press releases, t-shirts and aprons.

“We are privileged to honor the great work of entrepreneurial leaders like Nancy Rostomily,” **says Zenobia Barlow, executive director of the Center for Ecoliteracy**. “It's thrilling to see how creative, appealing and engaging a California Thursdays event can be. Cultivating community is at the heart of what we do.”

Rostomily also recognizes that the right answers often start with asking the right questions. “Instead of trying to find a new vendor, I started with asking, ‘What do we already have that is California sourced?’” she says. “And it turned out that we were already purchasing a lot of local food. From there, we decided to expand our selection and produce a vendor showcase.”

Not content to stop with this success, Rostomily is now introducing an innovative new vegetable item: kohlrabi sticks, working with a new producer, Farm Stand Fresh Foods, to bring this lesser-known, California-grown vegetable to schools for the first time.

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Hemet Unified School District Receives 2015 California Food for California Kids Innovation Award

BERKELEY, CALIF., October 20, 2015 ... Harold Sullins, director of nutrition services at Hemet Unified School District, today was presented with a [2015 California Food for California Kids Innovation Award](#) for his district's efforts to modernize school meals for sophisticated young palates under the [California Thursdays](#) program. The biennial award was presented by the Center for Ecoliteracy.

"When I grew up, school food was the standard fare – comfort classics," **Sullins says**. "We still do some of those items, but we now put a twist on it to modernize the food and 'wow' the students a bit more."

Recognizing that today's students have broader influences and tastes, Sullins has raised the bar for school food by emulating restaurant food trends. How? By adding menu items such as chicken and waffles (made with Mary's Chicken) and pulled-pork sandwiches on scratch-made pretzel buns.

"We are privileged to honor the great work of entrepreneurial leaders like Harold Sullins," **says Zenobia Barlow, executive director of the Center for Ecoliteracy**. "It's exciting when a district like Hemet – which has 24 schools and 21,000 students, and serves more than 4.3 million meals a year – take bold and tasty steps to expand their menus. It inspires the entire California Thursdays network, which collectively serves 1.75 million public school students in our state."

Sullins is quick to share the credit though. "Our staff takes a great amount of pride in the work they do," he says. "Even if it takes a little bit more effort, they are able to see the worthwhile results: a beautiful finished product and extremely satisfied students. It motivates them to keep pushing the envelope no matter how wacky an idea may sound."

The Hemet menu is also inspired by local food. "California Thursdays is a great opportunity for us to highlight some of the products that are available in our backyard," says Sullins. "For us, it's a steppingstone. It's something that we are looking to embrace not just on Thursdays, but throughout the school week."

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