

CONTACT:

Tara McNamara

San Diego Unified School District
Food & Nutrition Services
858-627-7316

Chris Smith

The Center for Ecoliteracy
(510) 845-4595 (office)
(415) 517-2844 (cell)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Innovative California Thursdays program expands to more than 220 SD Unified Schools, fastest growing in state

SAN DIEGO, CALIF., October 20, 2015 ... Following a successful one-year pilot, San Diego Unified Food & Nutrition Services is expanding its California Thursdays program to more than 220 schools – making San Diego Unified the fastest growing California Thursdays district in the state. Now, more than 130,000 students throughout the district have the option to eat a meal made entirely of California-grown food every Thursday.

“We are committed to teaching kids lifelong healthy eating habits,” says Gary Petill, director of San Diego Unified Food & Nutrition Services. “We want them to understand the importance of California Thursdays for our economy and for making healthier choices. Supporting our local farmers, producers and ranchers has such a positive impact.”

California Thursdays is a program that allows school districts, in collaboration with the Center for Ecoliteracy, to serve healthy, freshly prepared meals made with California grown ingredients. The program creates a “triple win:” improving student health and academic achievement, investing in the local economy and benefiting the environment.

San Diego Unified’s commitment to serving California food to California kids follows the nationwide effort to increase the amount of fresh fruits and vegetables served to students as outlined in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. San Diego Unified is looked at as a model for other school districts around the nation on how to serve students fresh, healthy meals prepared in-house using locally sourced ingredients.

“The Center for Ecoliteracy is a USDA Farm to School Support Service grantee that is leading the way,” said Kevin Concannon, USDA Under Secretary for Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services. “Through our Farm to School program, USDA supports and encourages innovative strategies, such as California Thursdays, which improves school meals with local foods. Using locally-sourced ingredients in school meals can help improve a child’s health and academic achievement, and has the potential to bolster local economies throughout California.”

San Diego Unified started its California Thursdays program in October 2014 at 18 elementary schools. The program grew to nearly 60 elementary schools during the 2014-15 school year. Over the course of the pilot year, San Diego Unified served nearly 80,000 California Thursdays meals.

Seeing the success of the program inspired the district to expand its efforts so that more students and local farmers, producers and ranchers could reap the benefits of serving nutritious meals made with locally sourced ingredients.

“We definitely believe in California food for California kids,” says Fred Espinosa, manager of product acquisition and production for San Diego Unified Food & Nutrition Services. “We believe in supporting smaller businesses that share values that we share.”

In the first four weeks since expanding, San Diego Unified has purchased more than 154,000 free-range, antibiotic-free Mary’s chicken drumsticks from Pitman Family Farms – the featured entrée for the California Thursdays meal. That’s more than 10 tons of chicken! It is projected that by the end of the 2015-16 school year more than 1.5 million drumsticks will have been purchased adding \$1.8 million dollars to California’s economy. Imagine the economic impact if all meals, every day were sourced entirely from California!

San Diego Unified believes in California food for California kids, and is committed to sourcing as much food as possible from both San Diego and California farmers, ranchers and producers. On any day, not just Thursdays, you can find produce from local farms; tortillas and salad dressing from Green Bellies, a San Diego-based company; tofu from San Diego Soy Dairy; bread rolls and breadsticks from southern California-based Galasso’s Bakery; and milk from Hollandia Dairy, also a southern California-based company.

Local farms that San Diego Unified works with include: Suzie’s Farm in Imperial Beach, Stehly Farms Organic in Valley Center, Sahu Subtropicals in Rainbow, Go Green Agriculture in Encinitas, Sunrise Farms in Vista, Mountain Meadow Mushrooms in Escondido, and many more.

Based on the rapid expansion and innovation of San Diego Unified’s California Thursdays program, the Center for Ecoliteracy recently presented both Petill and Espinosa the California Food for California Kids 2015 Leadership Award for Creativity and Dedication to Development of the California Thursdays Program.

"San Diego Unified's leadership, commitment, and engagement in the farm to school movement is truly inspiring," says Zenobia Barlow, executive director of the Center for Ecoliteracy. "We're proud to honor Gary Petill and Fred Espinosa with our California Food for California Kids Leadership Award. Their good work will continue to ensure that the next generation of San Diego children will benefit from the health and abundance of California's agriculture."

This year, the Center for Ecoliteracy began a regional pilot effort in San Diego County to enhance the network’s collective impact. Twelve San Diego County school districts are participating, along with local nonprofits and public agencies. The San Diego County California Thursdays Network serves more than 46 million meals annually to more than 316,000 students across 434 schools.

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For more information on California Thursdays, please visit the California Thursdays Media Room at www.californiathursdayspr.org.