



CENTER FOR  
ECOLITERACY



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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **‘California Thursdays’ Program Doubles in Size in Six Months to Deliver More California Food to California Kids**

**Sacramento, CA, April 23, 2014 ...** More than 1.2 million California students will be offered a surprise today: a meal made from foods grown in California and prepared freshly just for them. What started as a pilot program six months ago with 15 school districts is now sweeping the state. Forty-two California school districts, large, small, urban, suburban and rural, that collectively serve over 250 million school meals a year are participating in today’s statewide expansion of the program.

The “California Thursdays” program is predicated on the simple logic that California children will benefit from eating more fresh California-grown food. The program’s organizer, the Center for Ecoliteracy, hopes that freshly cooked meals made with more local ingredients will eventually become a regular part of all school menus served to students throughout the state.

Although a simple concept, implementing “California Thursdays” has not been easy. Food service directors have invested thousands of hours to reform an entrenched, centralized food system that ships produce around the nation, sometimes moving California produce to Chicago and other distant locations before returning it, highly processed, to California. Added to that are the challenges of creating recipes that children enjoy and that meet federal standards, finding local farmers who can supply school districts, training staff to cook and serve fresh meals, and encouraging students to try them.

Why bother? These innovative food service directors, in collaboration with the nonprofit Center for Ecoliteracy, know that buying, preparing and serving local California food is a triple win.

“Whenever we serve fresh, locally grown food to children with these recipes, they devour it,” says **Zenobia Barlow, executive director of the nonprofit Center for Ecoliteracy**. “That alone is a victory. Properly nourished children are healthier and ready to learn. And local procurement also benefits local economies and the environment.”

So today students in every corner of the state will enjoy menus featuring delicious, healthy, student-tested recipes cooked on site from scratch with California ingredients. Options range from fresh Chicken Fajita Rice Bowls to Asian Noodles With Bok Choy to Penne With Chorizo and Kale.

Implementing today's "California Thursdays" program are large urban districts such as Los Angeles, Oakland, Riverside, Sacramento, San Diego and San Francisco, as well as suburban and rural districts, including Antioch Unified, Elk Grove, Millbrae, Mt. Diablo, Napa Valley, Oceanside, Pacific Elementary in Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, Sweetwater Union High in San Diego County and Woodland Joint. For a complete list of participating school districts, go to [www.californiathursdayspr.org](http://www.californiathursdayspr.org).

"California Thursdays" was originally developed and successfully piloted with Oakland Unified School District last year. The program provides districts with implementation materials, like scaled recipes, staff training and procurement guidelines, to assist schools in their transition to healthier meal programs. It provides community engagement and marketing assets to support districts telling their story. It also features a dedicated website – [www.californiathursdays.org](http://www.californiathursdays.org) – with resources for parents and teachers, recipes, video, an infographic and articles about innovative school districts.

### **Nourished Students Are Better Learners**

According to the Centers for Disease Control, better nutrition improves academic grades and standardized test scores, reduces absenteeism and strengthens memory. One in four of California's children lives in a food insecure household; one in three is overweight or obese. Since many kids consume over half their day's calories at school, it is important that school districts ensure that the meals they serve are healthy and balanced. And studies show that kids are more likely to eat school meals if the food is fresh and attractive.

"We are proud to support the expansion of California Thursdays through our Farm to School Grant Program," said **Jesus Mendoza, Western Regional Administrator for the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service**. "Children in schools with farm to school programs eat more fruits and vegetables and are more willing to try new, healthy foods—important steps in the fight against childhood obesity. California Thursdays help to make the healthy choice the easy choice for children."

In addition, "California Thursdays" will take taxpayer funds that might otherwise go out of state and redirect them back into local economies. Economists say that every \$1 spent on local food fosters \$2.56 in local economic activity. Every job created in the production of local food also leads to an addition of two or more new jobs within the community.

"California Thursdays is a great first step in celebrating all that California agriculture has to offer," says **California Department of Food and Agriculture Secretary Karen Ross**. "It brings awareness to the fresh, wholesome and seasonally appropriate bounty of our great state. If we feed our children good, healthy food, if we connect them back to the place and the people and the practices that it came from, I think we're going to have great decision makers in our future."

The Center for Ecoliteracy and its partners plan to continue to expand "California Thursdays" and invite more school districts to participate. In Oakland last year, for example, California Thursdays began as a once-a-month program and transitioned to every Thursday within a school year. Other school districts have followed their example.

For more information about "California Thursdays" or to learn how new school districts can join this program, visit [www.ecoliteracy.org/california-thursdays](http://www.ecoliteracy.org/california-thursdays).

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**EDITORS:** A full online pressroom that includes contact information for every participating school district, additional quotes, fact sheets and photographs is available at: [www.californiathursdayspr.org](http://www.californiathursdayspr.org).

The Center for Ecoliteracy is a Berkeley-based nonprofit dedicated to education for sustainable living and a pioneer in school lunch reform. For more information, visit [www.ecoliteracy.org](http://www.ecoliteracy.org).