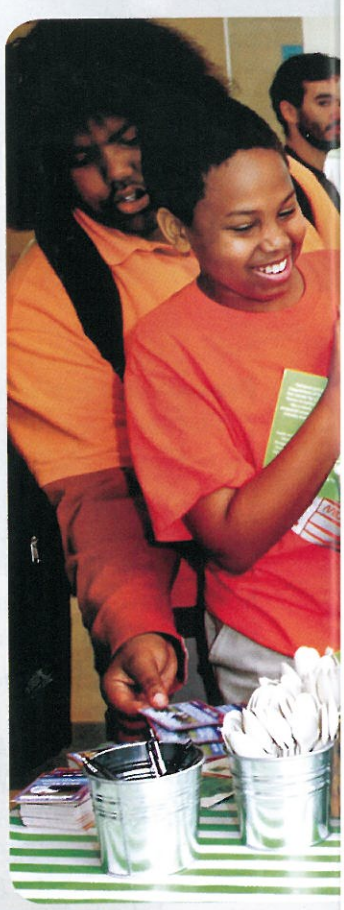
Roll call

Story by Joyce Mansfield
Photos courtesy of Center for Ecoliteracy

Oakland school district makes the grade with California Thursdays



"I want to eat this forever!"

The words are music to parents' ears when their child is eating a healthy meal. To those cooking and serving nutritious school lunches to thousands of students every day, comments like that are a symphony.

No wonder Alexandra Emmott, Oakland Unified School District Farm to School supervisor, recites it as one of her favorite quotes from a fourth-grader sampling a recipe from the district's California Thursdays program.

Homegrown, homemade

"Oakland Unified has a long history of sourcing produce locally, but California Thursdays is an opportunity for us to develop new recipes and also source proteins and grains locally," Emmott explained.

Beginning last school year, the district's 85 schools, pre-kindergarten through high school, have served 20,000 lunches every Thursday made entirely with food from California. Thirty Oakland schools have onsite kitchens, and two central kitchens serve another 55 schools.

The district looks statewide for California Thursdays meats, dairy products and grains, and receives produce from farms within 250 miles. One of the providers is ALBA Organics in Watsonville, which offers hands-on training for farmers and sells their crops.

First-generation farmer Matthew Bowling with ALBA Organics said of the school lunch program, "I think it's amazing. The students get food that's good for them and they can get excited about what they're getting in their lunch at school."

That sentiment extends to Oakland Unified parent Ruth Woodruff, who said, "I'm thrilled that my kids can have a hot lunch. It is quality food and they're very happy with it."

California Thursdays menus include kung pao chicken with bell pepper or broccoli (whichever is in season), chorizo and greens over whole wheat penne pasta with queso fresco, sesame ginger soba noodles with tofu and bok choy, and lemon oregano roasted chicken drums with brown rice. Emmott said four to six new recipes were slated for recent taste-testing and implementation this school year.

Oakland Unified School District students sample menu items and gather materials at an April event that launched weekly California Thursdays, with lunches made from food grown in the state.

Opportunities for change

Oakland Unified's annual $8 million food budget drills down to 60 cents per entrée, Emmott said. She explained that California Thursdays must be in keeping with that amount, and not reliant on outside funding, to ensure continuation of the program.

A partnership with the Berkeley-based Center for Ecoliteracy and a farm-to-school grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture help with staff training, school resources and promotional materials. Recipe handouts and "School Lunch Maps" show where each California Thursdays menu item originated, such as farms in Capay, Sanger, the San Jose area and the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys.

Oakland Unified is one of hundreds of California school districts implementing related programs, according to the USDA Farm to School Census, which noted that more than half of 625 districts that responded said they were engaged in farm-to-school activities in recent years. California Thursdays, Emmott said, was born of the notion of farm to school, but the district wanted to do something on a regular, consistent basis.

'Bite-sized implementation'

Their special all-local menu started once a month in October 2013 and transitioned to weekly California Thursdays in April 2014. Oakland Unified's success has established a path for other schools to follow.

"We call it 'a bite-sized implementation strategy'," said Adam Kesselman, Ecoliteracy's Rethinking School Lunch program manager, adding that Californians are fortunate to have "so many farms, so many producers."

Alexandra Emmott, Oakland Unified's Farm to School supervisor, explains California Thursdays to students in a school cafeteria.

Other schools in the state, he said, can use the tools and knowledge gained to implement their own version of the lunch program.

Fourteen additional school districts recently convened as part of a statewide rollout of California Thursdays, Kesselman continued, and plans include working with 10 to 15 more districts by year's end.

As an involved parent, Woodruff said of Oakland Unified's program, "We can set the example for other districts and be a resource for them as well."

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Photo courtesy of ALBA

Matthew Bowling, above, is a farmer at ALBA Organics, a produce provider for California Thursdays. In addition to serving local fare, the school-lunch program offers maps and recipes, right.

MORE ONLINE

For recipes that highlight California fare, courtesy of Oakland Unified and the Center for Ecoliteracy, visit www.californiabountiful.com.

NEW SCHOOL LUNCH RECIPE:
Whole Wheat Penne with Chorizo and Fresh Kale
Flavor Profile: Latin American
Serves: 4

School Lunch Map: Chorizo and Greens

CALIFORNIA THURSDAYS

You are here

Chorizo from Silva Sausage in San Jose, CA

Organic Muir Glen Tomatoes from the San Joaquin Valley, CA.

Organic Dinosaur Kale from ALBA growing collective in Watsonville, CA.

We're bringing California Food to California Kids ™ starting every Thursday across the district. This is the next step for Farm to School in Oakland with an entire lunch menu sourced from California. We're moving Farm to School beyond produce to include meats, grains, and dairy products produced right here in California.

THE TIMELINE:

We're rolling out CA Thursdays in the 2013-2014 school year, with once monthly California Thursdays in October, November, December, January, February, and March. Then, beginning Earth Day 2014, California Thursdays will be on the menu every week!

OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT