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TACKLING SCHOOL LUNCH REFORM AS AN EQUITY ISSUE IN OAKLAND The Center for Ecoliteracy Receives \$200,000 in Grants to Work with District

OAKLAND, CA, October 4, 2010—How can an urban school district struggling to reverse high dropout rates and low reading and math test scores—not to mention cope with a budget slashed by \$122 million in 2010 alone—take on school lunch reform?

“School food reform is not separate from school reform; it’s part of the basic work we have to do in order to correct systemic injustice, pursue equity, and give our children the best future possible,” says Oakland Unified School District Superintendent Tony Smith.

“We are committed to building a school district that provides quality education and equitable outcomes for all children—and to make this goal a reality, we have to create conditions that allow children to grow and to learn at high levels,” Smith adds. “This starts with taking care of our students’ most basic needs, such as nutrition, so they can develop and reach their full potential.”

The Center for Ecoliteracy, a nonprofit dedicated to education for sustainable living, recently received grants totaling \$200,000 from the San Francisco-based TomKat Charitable Trust and the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation to work with the district during the first phase of its commitment to transforming school food. A longtime school lunch reform advocate, the Center designed its Rethinking School Lunch initiative to cover both the quality of food served and teaching that links food to health and the environment; this program has been used in schools across the nation.

“We selected the Center for Ecoliteracy because of its long and successful history of changing food in schools by integrating that essential element too often missing in other reform efforts, namely teaching that helps young people change their relationship to food through their knowledge, attitudes, and behavior,” says Kat Taylor, founder of the TomKat Charitable Trust.

Taylor and her husband Thomas Steyer, founder of Farallon Capital Management in San Francisco, are founding directors of OneCalifornia Bank, a community development bank in Oakland. They were also among the first families in America to pledge to give the majority of their wealth to philanthropy in what has become known as the Giving Pledge.

The Center for Ecoliteracy played a central role in food reform as far back as 1998 when it convened 17 Berkeley-based organizations to develop the USDA-funded Food Systems Project. That project led to the nation’s first school district food policy, salad bars and gardens at all Berkeley elementary schools, and the introduction of fresh

organic produce in the lunchroom. The Center also partnered with Alice Waters and the Chez Panisse Foundation as well as the Berkeley Unified School District to deliver professional development and coaching to teachers through the School Lunch Initiative, the results of which were recently reported in a study published by the Dr. Robert C. and Veronica Atkins Center for Weight and Health at the University of California, Berkeley <http://www.ecoliteracy.org/downloads/school-lunch-initiative-evaluation>

“Our goal in working with Oakland schools is to provide a planning framework for school lunch reform that is comprehensive, realistic—and supports the superintendent’s goal of making Oakland schools a model of success within five years,” says Zenobia Barlow, cofounder and executive director of the Center for Ecoliteracy.

Oakland currently serves an estimated 40,000 meals a day through two central and 25 operating kitchens. The facilities, however, have not kept pace with the district’s growing needs. One of the central kitchens, for example, was designed for the preparation of 10,000 meals a day but is currently used for twice that number.

Yet Oakland is uniquely poised to successfully reform its food service program, Barlow says, because the superintendent, food service director, and parents are providing leadership from within the district and school community. And the kick-start funding from the TomKat Charitable Trust and S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation will now make it possible to bring in a broad range of experienced consultants throughout the 2010-2011 school year to address issues ranging from new facility construction to staff development.

“The Oakland Unified School District has pushed the limits of the meal program with improvements that can be made given our current funding and facilities,” says Jennifer LeBarre, the food service director who has been working to enhance the meal program for five years. “The feasibility study conducted in partnership with the Center for Ecoliteracy will now allow us to take the next steps for creating the best meal program in California.”

The Oakland School Food Alliance, a grassroots group that was started by parents but has grown to include community health organizations, students, and educators, also welcomed the move as a “necessary and pivotal step.”

“This is actually a study that we were trying to get off the ground ourselves,” says Melissa Newel, cofounder of the Oakland School Food Alliance and a mother of two. “We are thrilled that the Center for Ecoliteracy has taken it on.” But Newel emphasizes that it will take the whole community. In that spirit, the Oakland School Food Alliance plans to encourage health-based corporations (including Kaiser Permanente and Sutter Health) to make financial contributions to the cause.

“Obviously, we understand that these are tough economic times,” she adds. “Nevertheless, we think this is something that can and must be done, because we don’t see nutrition as separate from academic life. We see it as nourishing success.”