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Fox Outdoor leads charge in 'Farm to School' freshness

By: JOEL D. AMOS - For the North County Times

SANTA YSABEL ---- Research shows the sooner vegetables are served after being picked, the healthier they are. So when the Tierra Miguel Foundation partnered with International Rescue Committee (IRC) to launch "Farm to School" in order to get fresh produce to San Diego's children, it hoped the seed it planted at Santa Ysabel's Fox Outdoor School will spread throughout the county.



Students at Santa Ysabel's Fox Outdoor School load up their plates at the salad bar with organic vegetables Wednesday. A fledgling program brings fresh produce into the school, and program organizers hope to expand to other county schools.

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The Foundation runs a farm in Valley Center, 12 miles from the school.

"It's a perfect fit," said Ellee Igoe, IRC's Farm to School curriculum facilitator. The program, when in full force, will buy produce from local farmers and coordinate deliveries to local schools. Fox Outdoor School is the first in the county to utilize the service and its principal, Ron Nachbar, said he wouldn't miss the opportunity.

"I thought this would be great for us," he said. "Knowing that San Diego has one of the biggest areas for small farms, I thought it would be a great way of introducing these things to children."

IRC is a nonprofit that represents refugees when they arrive in the U.S. Aiding them in the transition process also involves reaching out to these refugee's children through the school system. The Grow Earth Collaborative, which will coordinate distribution from farms to schools, is in its infancy.

"Grow Earth is not ready for the large school district, and with the Miguel farm only miles away, it made sense to start with Fox Outdoor School. It's a natural partnership," said Igoe.

Health and environment

The Outdoor School program brings sixth-grade students from across the county to Valley Center for a weeklong overnight camp experience.

Students hike and explore the North County wilderness while learning about conservation and the natural world that surrounds them. Complementing their budding environmental awareness with the Farm to School program adds another layer to the experience.

"We try to educate them with the health benefits of good food. You can get great nutrition and it tastes great. It's terribly important to start introducing these things to children," Nachbar said.

Igoe agrees. "We are always advocating more nutritionally appropriate foods for our clients and all children within our school systems," she said. "Fox was the most eager (school) to get it started."

Igoe has visited Fox Outdoor School and seen firsthand the benefits of her organization's partnership with the school system. Recently, she worked with students in the outside garden, taking nutrition instruction to another level.

"It was great to see them so enthusiastic. They were already talking about expanding the garden and adding some fruit trees," Igoe said. "How excited they get from this is very encouraging. To see a sixth-grader eat a fig who has never seen one before is priceless."

Nachbar thought the garden would add another element to their produce-themed lessons. "It allows kids the opportunity to plant and cultivate. That is another great teachable moment as well," Nachbar said. The recently arrived salad bar also has the students' excitement level peaked as evidenced by how they tackle the first course of lunch.

"All those kids go table by table through the salad bar and everyone gets through in five to seven minutes."

Nature's circle

By the end of their outdoor school week, the children have learned about the importance of protecting nature and the healthy need to continually enjoy its bounty internally and externally. "We talk about the distance it takes and energy it takes to bring food to the table," Nachbar said.

They have also started a composting program, further reinforcing the circle-of-life lessons. "We teach them how foods break down and go back into the soil and the nourishment for future growth."

To take the program a step further with composting reaffirms Igoe's impression of Nachbar and his school. "They are so passionate, and to be already talking about soil and cycle of life and bring that into the food the students are eating is a real natural link," she said.

With obesity and the word "epidemic" being used around children, Nachbar knows there is no miracle cure, and changing eating habits in kids will take time. "Personally, I think improving nutrition for kids is really important. Their meals must be balanced and we are sure to tell them about what each food does for your body," he said.

With the most vibrant produce only miles away, Nachbar, Igoe and everyone involved in the Farm to School program get closer to changing attitudes.

"Good foods taste good. When you see foods with deep colors, like yellow teardrop tomatoes and deep greens, it is delicious. We're buying the items that are in season right off the farm," Nachbar said. "With Farm to School we have the ability to deliver the freshest organic vegetables to the kids. Eating good foods with solid nutrients helps kids in so many ways."