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Students at Fortuna Elementary School are eager to taste kale from a local farm. Under the CAFF Farm to School program, local farmers go into the classroom and teach students about where their food comes from. Submitted photo/CAFF

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Bringing the farm home

by Sharon Letts, 1/23/2007

According to a poll conducted by California Food Policy Advocates, in Humboldt County, 42 percent of youths over the age of 5 and 46 percent of adults are overweight. The study goes on to state that unhealthy eating and inactivity have far surpassed tobacco as the leading contributors to premature death — with cardiovascular disease and complications with diabetes the biggest players.

An organization that has been at the forefront of educating people about the nutritional value of fresh fruits and vegetables — as well as the importance of family farmers' role in providing that nutrition — is the Community Alliance with Family Farmers.

According to their Web site (www.caff.org), CAFF was founded in 1978 in Yolo County — home of UC Davis. An advocate group, their first issue was demonstrating against the implementation of the mechanical harvester, which, according to the organization's time line, had put many farm workers out of work by 1979.

CAFF has been educating the people of California for the past 28 years on the importance of diversity on the farm, limiting pesticides — which in turn reduces birth defects and chronic health effects (Senate Bill 950, circa. 1980-1985) — advocating local food systems, as opposed to large-scale commercial systems that miss the mark on nutritional value, and smart distribution.

Longtime Farm to School Coordinator Michelle Wyler founded the Humboldt County Community

Alliance with Family Farmers Chapter two years ago, with the intent of widening her funding base for more education. The plan worked, as within the first year the organization secured a quarter of a million dollars in much-needed funding that will be used in part to further education on agricultural sustainability for low-income kids in 30 schools across the county.

“Being under the CAFF umbrella is excellent,” Wyler said. “The guidelines are broad, and they give the chapters the freedom to choose what to work on. We aren’t mandated to do policy work. We can focus on Humboldt issues as long as we stay within the scope of their guidelines.”

So far, under CAFF, the Farm to School program continues to educate students by inviting local farmers into the classroom, who inspire the students to eat better by sharing the diversity from their fields.

“Oftentimes, teachers and parents think the kids won’t eat vegetables, but if it’s presented to them in a fun way they’ll actually eat anything,” Wyler said, remembering a particular kale-eating adventure in one classroom. “I’ve seen kids pull up vegetables from the ground and eat them. When farmers come into a classroom, the kids have tons of questions ... What kind of animals do they have? Just a lot of questions. If the farmer asks them where milk comes from, they say, ‘The store,’ and that will lead into this whole discussion on where our food comes from.”

Implementing salad bars in schools has also been a pet project of Farm to School that will continue under CAFF, but Wyler said they have more in store for schools.

“We’ve developed a program for teachers with a curriculum to help them with school gardens,” Wyler said. “So far, we’ve trained six teachers and provided them with activity packets.”

Wyler said the subjects covered within the curriculum for school gardens include the history of food, or tracking where food originates.

“We took the potato and talked about how they originally came from Peru, then Ireland,” Wyler explained. “We talked about how they have only been in this country for about 200 years and they weren’t well received because they were considered the poor man’s diet and are in the nightshade family and people thought they were poisonous.”

Future plans include turning the Arcata Educational Farm — which is now a host site for Farm to School tours — into a more comprehensive educational farm model for school field trips, and a home gardening program to help students educate those at home about growing their own food.

“The University Cooperative Extension has had a program for years called ‘yarden,’ where they planted a 1-yard-by-1-yard plot of ground,” Wyler said. “We’d like to make it a summer project for kids.”

Wyler said students could work their yarden during the summer months and, once school starts, photographs would be taken and awards would be handed out for the best efforts.

“We teach a lot about nutrition in the schools. It would be nice to make a bridge at home, as parents are making the purchases. They are the ones buying produce.”

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