



Sam Harburg and Merrill Llewya, students at Lincoln Elementary School in Olympia, dig into the organic salad bar during lunch period. (Paul Joseph Brown / P-I)

Olympia district's farm-to-school program a role model

Budgeting takes a little creativity, but organic is a staple

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By JENNIFER LANGSTON
P-I REPORTER

OLYMPIA -- Zorya Madrone has polished off her locally grown carrots. She's working on chickpeas, while brandishing a gnawed organic Asian pear.

Across the Olympia School District, each cafeteria offers a hot lunch and salad bar loaded with protein sources, organic produce and greens picked a few miles down the road.

"My whole house is vegan, so we eat lots and lots of vegetables," Madrone explained, a first-grade-sized bite suspiciously missing from the egg patty on her plate.

In a time of tight budgets, the district has found ways to buy food that others consider luxuries. Half to 70 percent of its produce on any given day is organic, compared with the occasional item in many schools. About 7 percent comes from local farms.

Food Services Director Paul Flock, who has received national attention for his lunch program, hasn't found local sources for everything. Some peter out in winter. But he regularly buys local greens, carrots, winter squash, potatoes, onions and seasonal fruit. The district has become a safety net for farmers.

"If farmers have a surplus of something and they don't have a market, they can call me and we'll help them out," he said. "A few years ago, we had a bumper crop of blueberries, so I bought a lot."

The district's manageable size -- 18 schools -- makes the job easier. But working with smaller local farms isn't as hard as some food service directors think, he said.

"If you want to do it, there's ways to do it" and satisfy state bidding rules, Flock said. "But with farmers it may take you three days to get ahold of them."

The organic salad bar started five years ago after parents at Lincoln Elementary helped make connections with local farms. It's now offered in every school.

For the first time this year, Kirsop Farm planted potatoes specifically for schools. In a Tumwater field, workers sowed rows of russets, in addition to the farm's gourmet varieties.

Owner Colin Barricklow said the school district pays the same as other customers, such as the local co-op grocery. "I know Paul's been creative about ways to fund it because we're organic and local, and it costs more than what they're getting from the big distributors," he said.

Flock, who serves 9,000 lunches a day, says annual produce costs rose by \$20,000 after they introduced the organic salad bar. He initially balanced that out by eliminating desserts and terminating a pizza contract. This year, he'll save more by scrapping the plastic "sporks."

At Lincoln, food is woven into the fabric of the school. Kids diligently scrape cafeteria scraps into the worm bin bucket. They tend an organic garden with berry identification cards.

Fourth-graders surrounded by apple peels in a student kitchen do math and measure oats for a cobbler recipe. Students sell produce salvaged from neighborhood fruit trees and gardens, raising money for the food bank.

For those who argue that hungry kids don't care where their carrots come from or if they're organic, Principal Cheryl Petra has a simple answer.

"It's really adult work," she said. "It's our job to provide choices that nourish our children and then that becomes part of what they understand about the world."



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Kirsop Farm owner Colin Barricklow picks Yukon gold potatoes in a Tumwater field. The farm sells to the Olympia School District and hopes to start supplying Black Hills High School in the background.

P-I reporter Jennifer Langston can be reached at 206-448-8130 or jenniferlangston@seattlepi.com.

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