

agog discussion | Promoting Healthy Habits in our Schools



On May 23, Mark and Brenda Saling welcomed friends and neighbors to their SE Portland home to discuss ways to improve school provided food and support children's health and academic success.

Two local experts facilitated the discussions:

Dr. Michelle Markesteyn Ratcliffe, Farm to School Program Manager with the Oregon Department of Agriculture, and **Caitlin Blethen**, Youth Grow Manager at Growing Gardens.

Some parents participating in the discussion said it seemed like many kids in the US are confident and possess high self esteem, but don't perform up to the standards they should academically. Several parents in the group said that their kids, who attend the local public elementary school, are not given enough time to eat, and often prioritize recess over eating. Some students arrive home without having eaten lunch at all. **Naturally, parents are concerned about how to nourish young minds and bodies, and how to get kids engaged in their own health.**

The conversation started with discussion about why only 37% of students (approx 170 per day) eat hot lunch at the school. Reasons suggested by parents in the group included their kids disliked the taste of school food (aside from the pizza), not enough vegetarian choices are available, dairy alternative beverages are not available, and that some kids seem to prefer to bring food from home.

When guests discussed their desire to establish a community garden at their local school, they shared that several school parents are very reluctant to do so because of concerns about losing financial support for arts and physical education classes. The sense was that in this community at least, many students already know how to garden and compost and eat their fruits and vegetables, so limited school funds could be used on activities parents are not already providing. But the parents who attended this agog discussion are optimistic: "If we build it, they will come!"



They're looking at the big picture. Creating a community school garden is an opportunity to support students' health and wellness, encourage students' social and emotional development and enhance academic achievement. Foods grown in the garden can also be used to supplement school lunch offerings in the cafeteria, create tasting tables that feature a certain harvest, and can be incorporated into classroom curricula. Beyond the borders of their school, they are envisioning donating a portion of their bounty to food banks and partnering with a sister garden.

agog discussion | Promoting Healthy Habits in our Schools

Parents involved in the school's Green Team have been instrumental in eliminating the use of styrofoam, plastic utensils and plastic straws. They recently switched to using silverware that required an industrial dishwasher for their kitchen/cafeteria, which Portland Public Schools purchased. They want to work collaboratively with the district to continue improving the quality of school meals.

Metropolitan Family Service offers SUN after school programs at 24 low-income school sites in the greater Portland area. The percentage of children who participate in the Free and Reduced Lunch Program is as high as 93% at some schools. Six of these sites feature community gardens which kids and community members have helped build and continue to nurture.

Schools are a significant location where kids get a majority of their food and nutrition.

More than half the kids in the state rely on schools as a major source of food, and in this economy, that percentage is growing. Portland Public Schools Nutrition Services serves 85 schools and provides 11,124 breakfasts and 21,168 lunches each day. Portland is a leader in Farm to School and local purchasing and participates in a national initiative funded by Kellogg that helps large school districts (those with 40,000 or more students) procure more healthful, more sustainably produced and regionally sourced food such as grass fed beef and local chicken. Portland's efforts to integrate regionally grown food into school meals have primarily been cultivated through two popular PPS programs: Harvest of the Month and Local Flavors.

The "Harvest of the Month" program helps provide food system education to students and highlights the great agriculture of the Northwest. PPS celebrates a local fruit or vegetable by serving it in school meals twice during the month and decorating school cafeterias with posters that highlight the fruit or vegetable and farm of origin.

Local Flavors is a way to highlight regional products that are served on a daily and weekly basis including Shepherd's Grain flour, a sustainable wheat flour grown and harvested in the Northwest and used by the Clackamas Bakery to make all of the whole wheat rolls and hamburger buns. That same great Shepherd's Grain flour is used by Roadrunner Pizza in Gladstone to make fresh pizza dough that is proofed before baking in the cafeteria so they puff up beautifully just like at



agog discussion | Promoting Healthy Habits in our Schools

your local pizzeria. Currently 32% of all products come from our Northwest foodshed which includes Oregon, Washington and northern California.

Did you know?

Oregon is one of only a handful of states that does not provide state support for school food in addition to federal funding. Schools have a total food budget of \$1.10 to \$1.18 for ALL the food on the plate.

Federal reimbursement is \$2.70 per lunch and 51% of that amount pays for payroll and health care costs, 44% is used for food and supplies and 5% is used for fuel, storage, maintenance, small equipment, capital expenditures and office overhead. The budget for Portland Public Schools Nutrition Services comes from federal reimbursement for free and reduced price meals (79%) and from cash sales (21%).

Even without state funding, Portland Public Schools is leading the way in improving school food and teaching students where their food comes from. Both the Harvest of the Month and Local Flavors programs are enhanced by dedicated educators who integrate garden-based educational activities for PPS students. Passionate teachers, parents, and community agencies have helped create and maintain school/community gardens to give students hands-on learning experiences.

Connecting kids, classrooms, cafeterias and communities

Portland Public Schools Nutrition Services welcomes the use of school grown produce in the school lunches. Caitlin Blethen noted that **research shows that students who participate in growing food are more likely to eat those foods than those who don't participate in the process.** Over 40 Portland Public Schools now have school gardens; several are growing some fruits, vegetables and herbs that are incorporated into the cafeteria salad bar.

School-community gardens offer opportunities for kids to genuinely engage in lifelong learning. Michelle Ratcliffe noted that gardens have been shown to contribute to the development of the whole child. A growing body of research demonstrated these programs enhance or support kids':

- knowledge of science, math and nutrition
- academic and cognitive skills such as ordering and observation
- development of life skills
- social and moral development. For example there are over 25 youth developmental assets associated with garden-enhanced education such as team work, self-efficacy and autonomy, attitudes towards school, food, the environment and the community.

agog discussion | Promoting Healthy Habits in our Schools

Creating a living laboratory develops awareness of where food comes from and environmental literacy – our connection with nature, community activism, and social justice. There is no substitute for getting your hands dirty. And who doesn't love a snap pea teepee?

The prospects for learning with food and blending food education across the standard disciplines of math, literacy, science, and social science abound.



Advocating for teachers to incorporate gardening into their curricula creates opportunities for social engagement, creates an environment for life-long-learning and good decision making skills, supports the development of the *whole child*, integrates the physical, social, and academic learning environments, addresses multiple intelligences, and can help close the achievement gap.

Changing kids' palates takes time. Research has shown that it takes 10 hours of instructional time to change knowledge, 20 hours to change attitudes, and 50 hours to influence behaviors. Parents can support teachers in the classroom, during gardening time, and in the cafeteria.

Several parents agreed that it is important to work toward state and nationwide change and to do so by **supporting and drawing upon what is working in our schools**. School lunches cost approximately half as much as packing your own. If schools get consistent support – that is, increasing the number of full-paying students eating school food - food quality for all children will improve. Harvest of the Month and Local Flavors programs introduce healthy – and often new - foods to kids.

The group identified several ways that parents can drive change:

- Increase school-parent communication about the importance of participation in the school lunch program through attractive, regularly distributed flyers and school newsletters.
- Support key harvest times with special events (e.g., fresh blueberry day) and circulate Harvest of the Month and Local Flavors flyers/fact sheets.
- Advocate for a school garden! [Growing Gardens](#) provides training for school garden educators/coordinators. Their website also provides helpful information on school gardens.
- Look at Portland Schools Foundation's Eat.Think.Grow website, <http://eatthinkgrow.pps.k12.or.us/> for info on wellness and school gardens.

agog discussion | Promoting Healthy Habits in our Schools

- Once a garden is created, invite the media, talk it up with friends and neighbors, and advertise it widely. Nikole Williams of PPS Nutrition Services can provide information on how to grow produce that can be incorporated in school lunch.
- Learn more about [Food Corps](#), a new Americorps educational and results-oriented school garden and farm to school program.
- Buy locally and share new research about the importance of local food (economic, environmental, social, and nutritional).
- Highlight the demand for high quality food federally through the Department of Agriculture and Department of Education, and advocate for public school funding increases on a national and state level.
- Work with parents at your school to implement the district wellness policy initiatives: http://www.pps.k12.or.us/files/board/3_60_062_AD.pdf
- Make your voice heard. Federal Child Nutrition legislation is being considered now. A proposal in the Senate calls for a \$4.5 billion increase in funding over 10 years and would require the U.S. Department of Agriculture to set new standards for all school food. The House version requests an \$8 billion increase.
- The Oregon Farm to School and School Garden Coalition proposed legislation asking for state funding, totaling \$22M in the 2009 Legislative session. Read Deborah Kane's testimony to the Oregon legislature <http://www.ecotrust.org/farmtoschool/> (see Ecotrust Testimony in Favor of HB 2800, April 2, 2009) - page 10 has a picture and cost analysis of a local lunch). If Nutrition Services had more dollars per meal, they would buy even more local fruits and veggies direct from farmers and would feature northwest chicken and beef more frequently.
- Request that school administrators strongly consider placing recess before lunch to ensure kids have time to eat a healthy meal, and allowing more time during lunch to eat.
- Increase parent involvement, particularly during the lunch hour.
- Read [FRAC 101: The Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act](#) and support increased funding for child nutrition programs. The Act authorizes all of the federal school meal and child nutrition programs, which provide funding to ensure that low-income children have access to healthy and nutritious foods.
- Learn more about School Food FOCUS <http://www.schoolfoodfocus.org/>

The mission of Metropolitan Family Service is to strengthen families and individuals while enhancing their participation in community life. Organized by MFS, **A Gathering of Good (agog)** is a series of community events promoting discussion, civic engagement and social change. In addition to exploring important social issues as a community, **agog dinners & discussions** raise public awareness of MFS's effective programming for children, families, and older adults. MFS is celebrating 60 years of community service in 2010.



Metropolitan
Family Service

Because together, we can do more.