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Celebrating Local Food, Farms & Cuisine Season by Season

Growing Healthy Kids:



Growing Healthy Kids: Eat Your Homework

Story and Photo By Judith Nemes

Imagine Chicago schools where students grow vegetables in a nearby garden, learn about the foods' healthy nutrients in the classroom, then eat their "homework" in the lunchroom or cook up their harvest in an after school program. If a newly-formed consortium of local food and kid-oriented education groups has its way, that scenario could become commonplace in Chicago area schools in the near future.

On a frigid day in late January, about 40 people from 25 Chicago-area organizations gathered at the Logan Square Kitchen event space on the near west side. They swapped ideas about how to work together to help kids eat healthier, to combat the growing epidemic of childhood obesity, and to teach students about gaining access to local fresh foods. What they came up with was a new collective they dubbed "GrowingHealthy Kids."

"There is so much need in the city of Chicago for food education, improvement of the foods being served in the schools, and giving (teachers and administrators) tools in the fight against obesity," says a passionate Melissa Graham, president and founder of Purple Asparagus, a non-profit education and advocacy group that focuses on healthy food and families.

"No one organization can battle these problems in their entirety," says Graham, who is also a chef and owner of Monogramme, a catering company that sources local foods. There are so

many schools that need information about organizations which are out there ready to help, so she initiated the idea for the consortium last fall with a handful of other likeminded activists.

Graham was inspired to bring these groups together after she noticed huge disparities between schools that were engaged in food and health-oriented programs and others that were virtually ignoring the topics. Purple Asparagus conducts cooking and food education programs in several Chicago schools.

"We'd be in one school, like McAuliffe Elementary in Logan Square, where there was a powerhouse bringing in all these healthy food groups to educate their kids, and another school less than a quarter mile away might have nothing going on because they may not have an advocate there looking for these programs," she explains with frustration.

Seven Generations Ahead is another food education group that was instrumental in assembling the consortium. The non-profit group has a "Fresh from the Farm" program that sends educators into the classroom once a week for a couple months to teach students about their food: where it comes from, its seasonality, and its nutritional value. At the end of each lesson, they have tastings. They also take students on field trips to local farms, explains Melissa Tobias, education coordinator for the Oak Park-based organization.

"Going into the classroom and introducing kids to fresh blueberries, spinach, and pomegranates makes a difference," asserts Tobias. "Adults think they won't like it, but we see kids who get excited to go home and make a salad with spinach."

Tobias and her staff teach in low-income neighborhoods in Humboldt Park, Logan Square, and Pilsen, where the options are limited for families to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. "We teach these kids where to access these foods and how to make better choices about what they eat," she says.

The day I visited Tobias and Courtney Woods, educators, working with 7th and 8th grade girls at Ames Middle School in Logan Square, they played a game of Jeopardy using fruit and vegetable nutrition as categories. After the game, they sampled freshly-made blueberry smoothies.

One of the primary concerns of the consortium was how to get the many small, non-profit food-oriented businesses to work together sharing information and services. Currently, these groups are competing for limited grants and face funding challenges. As a result, they do not always tell school administrators about other competitors programs that may offer complementary services. When this happens, it's the students who suffer, worries Tobias.

Growing Healthy Kids aims to eliminate this mindset and encourage collaboration. "There's a lot of momentum in our field right now. The work we do together can be more powerful than the work any individual organization can do alone," she insists.

Indeed, a vegetable nutrition program is greatly enhanced if students can get their hands dirty planting and harvesting some of the foods they learned about in the classroom. Another participant in the consortium is We Farm America, a small for-profit company in Bronzeville that works with schools and communities planting organic gardens. We Farm has two ongoing gardening projects: one at Whitney Young Magnet High School just west of the Loop and one at Senn High School in Rogers Park, according to Seneca Kern, lead agronomist.

"The biggest challenge working with kids is connecting the dots for them about where their food comes from and how everything works together," explains Kern. "We focus on the growing part, but we hope the schools work with other groups like Purple Asparagus for food education and Urban Worm Girl for composting."

The day I chatted with Sarah Elizabeth Ippel, Founder and

Executive Director of the two year-old Academy for Global Citizenship near Midway Airport (funded by the Chicago Public Schools), I found her at her desk eating the lunch she had grabbed from the school cafeteria. The food on her plate was impressive: tempeh, sweet potatoes, brown rice, and a side of sliced mangoes.

Everything on the menu was made from scratch that morning in the school kitchen with 100% organic ingredients. The Academy is experimenting with a fully organic food pilot program in partnership with Chartwells-Thompson Hospitality, another member of the consortium and the largest food provider to the Chicago Public Schools. The school's organic garden, that the children help plant and harvest, provides some of the ingredients for the menu and they also get eggs from chickens which are raised and cared for on school grounds.

Nearly all 150 students in the school eat breakfast and lunch there everyday, says Ippel, adding that about 80 percent of them are from low-income households that qualify for free or reduced-fee meals. After school, Purple Asparagus conducts a cooking program with students and their families. Ippel notes, "At the end of the day, what we're feeding students needs to align with what we're teaching them."

School administrators, teachers and parents are likely to agree that students throughout Chicago land have much to gain from learning about local, healthy food and eating more nutritious meals while they're at school, argues Graham. Growing Healthy Kids is still expanding its membership and expects to add more groups as word gets out about its efforts. In the meantime, the new consortium is already mapping out its first health and nutrition education fair, a platform for its member groups to introduce the services they can provide to schools in Chicago and the suburbs. The fair will be a one-stop opportunity for administrators and other stakeholders to learn about the wealth of food-related programs in the region. The event is expected to take place later in the summer before the beginning of the next school year, says Graham.

"What we're doing is just a drop in the bucket, but the opportunity to collaborate for these kids is really empowering and we're all inspired by it."

OTHER PARTICIPANTS IN GROWING HEALTHY KIDS

(at press time):

Chicago Botanic garden
CLOCC (Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children)
Common threads
Food Ateliers
Fooditude
Fresh Connections
The good Food project
Gourmet gorilla/green Bag Lunch
Green City Market
Green sugar press
Growing power, inc.
Healthy schools Campaign
Jane Addams Hull House Association
Nurture

Openlands
Organic school project
SCARCE
(School and Community Assistance for Recycling and Composting Education)
Slow Food Chicago
The Kids'table
Organic Life
University of Illinois Extension
Urban Worm Girl

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