

# Chicago Public Radio®

## Fresh Farms Give City Children Food Options

Produced by **Natalie Moore** on Sunday, August 16, 2009

**Many Chicago youth live in neighborhoods that are either food deserts or lack healthy eating options. And childhood obesity in Chicago is higher than national rates. A free program called Fresh from the Farm is teaching students about food in creative ways. The goal is to form them to have agency when making their own food choices.**



Photo by Liz Bustamonte

The cafeteria at Ames Middle School in the Logan Square neighborhood is a “no-yuck” zone. It’s a place where several students try new foods without wrinkling their noses – too much.

Fresh Farms teacher Melissa Tobias is teaching this group of students how to make a mini-Caprese salad. They put a grape tomato on a toothpick.

TOBIAS: Take a little piece of your basil. So you can rip off half of it or a third of it maybe.

The basil is grown in the school’s courtyard. Several buckets with green leaves sprouting are in the makeshift garden.

TOBIAS: We have these mozzarella cheese balls but they’re pretty big so we’ll cut them in half.

Next comes the finale that she shakes in a bottle.

*ambi: balsamic vinaigrette*

They eat it all at once, letting the juice of the tomatoes pop in the mouths.

*ambi: I see a lot of heads nodding*

These sixth, seventh and eighth graders grow carrots, cilantro, green beans and cantaloupe at school. They've tried foods from arugula to squash. Seven Generations Ahead, an environmental nonprofit, started Fresh on the Farm in 2001.

The point is to connect growing food and learning about the health benefits. This is the first year Fresh on the Farm expanded to a summer youth program.

Janelis Lopez is an eighth grader at Ames. She's had an epiphany: she typically east junk food when it's snack time.

JANELIS: Sometimes I just eat chips and all that stuff and it's not really nutritional or healthy. And this really makes a different change to me and it's more nutritious but it's also good.

That background noise is from smoothies that Janelis and her peers are concocting.

*ambi of a blender*

They are putting to use what they learned about food and rainbows. The blues in blueberries are for anti-antioxidants. Bananas are white and have potassium.

TOBIAS: Rather than just kind of teaching them about nutrients out of a textbook they actually see how it helps their bodies and I think having the connection between working in the dirt and watering the plants themselves and watching the plants actually grow and produce the foods that they eat is a really cool connection to me.

There's been research to show that children with healthier diets do better in school. Most of the students in Fresh from the Farm receive free or reduced school lunches.

Tobias engages them about where they eat.

TOBIAS: Do you ever go out to restaurants?

STUDENTS: Popeye's...McDoanld's

Tobias doesn't judge the fast food choices. She simply asks them if healthy food is sold there and then tells them the cheapest way to get healthy food is to grow it. Some of them raise their hands and say they will try to make that mini-Caprese salad at home.