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NST135

30 April 2015

Farm to School Survey at OUSD – Final Project Reflection

Farm to School Program

The Farm to School program strives to bring fresh, healthy and local food closer to schools by using at least one of three elements: education, school gardens and procurement choices. Students learn about food, nutrition and agriculture through education in the classroom and the kitchen, during field trips and by getting their hands dirty in school gardens. The emphasis in procurement is placed on increasing the purchases from local farmers. Farm to School program not only helps children lead healthier lives, but also provides local farmers with financial opportunities that will in turn help the community to stimulate its economy. Currently, 44% of the schools in the US are part of the Farm to School program engaging 23.5 million students (National Farm to School Network, 2015).

A large part of the Farm to School program in the Oakland Unified School District is California Thursdays, which simply means that local food, like fruits, vegetables and beef, is served for lunch every Thursday (Center for Ecoliteracy, 2015). Additionally, Farm to School at OUSD includes menu and recipe development, training of staff members to use the latest food safety guidelines and technology, infrastructure improvements to support the preparing of healthy food, and supporting school produce markets that take place at 18 sites. The Farm to School program also partners with garden educators throughout the district, supporting garden to

cafeteria food sourcing. There are also after school cooking programs (National Farm to School Network, 2015).

Farm to School Survey Project Description

The Farm to School Survey is an aspirational project. The survey is aimed at assessing the effectiveness of the ongoing Farm to School related projects by gaining an understanding of how much the students, as well as their families know about fresh and local food. Half of the survey is meant to help the school district assess the impact that California Thursdays have had on the students' knowledge and relay that information to USDA that provided the Farm To School grant. The other half of the survey is designed as a pre-survey to find out about student access to fruits and vegetables. This information is important in securing an additional grant from California Department of Agriculture for OUSD nutrition programs (National Farm to School Network, 2015).

The goal is to acquire 80 to 150 survey responses of ten target schools each, from elementary schools to high schools. The survey questions asked the students whether they like local Californian food, and how much they know about them. The survey is three pages long, and contains pictures to make it look more interesting. Part of the surveying was conducted during lunchtime in the cafeteria and in other parts of the campus where students gather to have lunch. This timing was chosen to capture the students' thoughts about nutrition related issues when they are already focused on food. Students of all grade levels are included. To reach more students in the elementary level, the survey is also conducted in the classroom.

School Demographics

The two schools at which our team helped conduct the surveys were Oakland Technical High School (Oakland Tech) and Coliseum College Prep Academy (CCPA). Oakland Tech is an open campus, which gives students the chance to eat elsewhere. In 2013, 48 % of the students at Oakland Tech had free and reduced lunch. Of the approximately 2000 students at Oakland Tech, 64.2% are socioeconomically disadvantaged (Oakland Unified School District, 2013b). CCPA, on the other hand is a very small campus with only 500 students in grades 6-12. All of the students are socioeconomically disadvantaged, and the free and reduced lunch rate was 96% in 2013. All of the students that eat at the cafeteria receive a free lunch (Oakland Unified School District, 2013a).

Experiences and Challenges

At Oakland Tech, 80 responses were collected during their 44-minute lunch period (12:43-1:26pm). Due to the long lunch period, and the fact that there are multiple appealing restaurants nearby, most students choose to eat off campus, even when almost half of them (almost 1000 students) are eligible for free and reduced lunch. According to John Pleasants, the relatively high price of lunch (\$4-\$5) lowers the number of on-campus lunch eaters down to only about 100 to 150 students. This became apparent in the small size of the cafeteria and the low flow rate of students in and out of the cafeteria. Consequently, the goal of 80 surveys in such a big school was more difficult to reach than one might think. Also, students having their lunch elsewhere in the school area were not very interested in answering questions about food that they don't consume. Still, almost all of the students that had lunch in the cafeteria were willing to take the survey and seemed to put a lot of effort into it, some were even enthusiastic about it.

At Coliseum College Prep Academy, the lunch period was 30 minutes and the students came in groups, which helped us easily reach the goal of 120 surveys. Most of the students surveyed were in middle school and they were very willing to fill out the survey - some asked to fill the survey as they saw their friends do it. Some students, however, didn't take the surveys seriously and filled out the same, unrelated answer to every question.

The biggest challenge during this project was the coordination and scheduling of the times to conduct the surveys. Thus, even though the overall goal of the Farm to School survey was to get information from ten schools, we were assigned to survey only two of them due to the time constraint. However, according to Pleasants, our help was mainly needed for lunchtime surveying as he is able to conduct the classroom surveys by himself, and so we were an important part in the project.

Conclusions

As of now, the Farm to School survey project at the OUSD end is not complete. For this reason, the results from the two schools we surveyed are not yet available. Even so, we were able to make some observations about the students' eating behavior: a lot of food was wasted, for instance some discarded bananas for being "too mushy". In the end, we were glad to see that most of the students were quite willing to participate, which shows that they are probably in a very good condition to learn more about healthy eating and local food. The students became highly motivated to fill out the survey when they heard that this would be their opportunity to say what they think about school food, which shows that students are eager to provide input if asked. This positive mood of the students can help increase the effectiveness of the Farm to

School program and improve the attractiveness of the food to the students, which in turn has the potential to increase the amount of students who take advantage of the free meal. As dietetics students, seeing more kids eat a healthy lunch that is provided to them at school, is a goal worth pursuing.

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