

# School meals study provides food for thought

September 23, 2010 | By Stacy Finz, Chronicle Staff Writer



ANNCOOPER07\_174\_cl.JPG Ann Cooper with two kids from Martin Luther King Junior Middle School in the school's "Edible Garden." The students are Beebe Sanders (2nd from left) and Riley Denison (far right). Dana Lukes (far left) is with Full Bloom Baking Company and is tagging along to get consulting help from Ann Cooper. Ann Cooper is a chef who is transforming school lunch in Berkeley. She's gotten rid of junk and has put salad bars in most of the schools. Story is about Ann, a chef and author, and her transformation in school lunches for the Berkeley Unified School District. Craig Lee / The Chronicle  
Credit: Craig Lee

0  
tweets  
tweet



Like

Be the first of your friends to like this.

Science classes in Berkeley are taught weekly in campus gardens. English, history and math courses are held regularly in the kitchen. The cafeterias have been rid of processed food, and everything is made from scratch.

The experiment started five years ago to teach a generation reared on junk food about good nutrition, where their food comes from and the environment.

The naysayers laughed, "Only in Berkeley." Even the less skeptical wondered if kids could be weaned off Pop-Tarts with the lure of

Brussels sprouts.

Now, the results are in. According to a new study, Berkeley Unified School District's School Lunch Initiative works.

**Sponsored Links**

**[Local Retirement Homes](#)**

Columbus Retirement Communities And Homes - Active, Assisted Living.  
[yellowpages.com](http://yellowpages.com)

**[Craving Delicious Boudin?](#)**

Boudin, cracklins and more. Lafayette is your connection.  
[www.lafayette.travel](http://www.lafayette.travel)

A three-year UC Berkeley study shows that students fed a steady curriculum of gardening, cooking and nutrition have significantly better eating habits than children who don't get the same instruction.

**Integrated approach**

The report, scheduled to be released next week by the university's Dr. Robert C. and Veronica Atkins Center for Weight and Health, is one of the first to look at how an integrated approach to food education at the elementary-school level can contribute to children's health and welfare. The center's findings could prove timely as Congress prepares to vote, possibly as early as this week, on child nutrition legislation.

"Ideally, this could be used to influence public policy," said Neil Smith, Berkeley's assistant superintendent.

Like Smith, Ann Cooper, a chef who was hired to renovate the district's lunch program and has since left to start a similar program in Boulder, Colo., hopes the report gives others a push.

"This is the first evaluation that really shows that after two to three years, you can have a profound impact on the well-being of children," she said.

In 2006, researchers from the Atkins Center began following the eating patterns of 238 Berkeley fourth- and fifth-graders. They wanted to know if the comprehensive nutrition program funded by the Chez Panisse Foundation and the Center for Ecoliteracy, two local nonprofits, was making a difference in kids' attitudes about food.

They compared the students enrolled in Berkeley schools with highly developed food programs - cooking and garden classes, improved cafeteria lunches and nicer dining facilities - with other students in the district's schools that don't have such an extensive curriculum.

What they found was that the students in the more advanced programs increased their fruit and vegetable consumption by 1.5 servings a day, while the other students decreased their intake by nearly a quarter serving. The first group also scored higher on nutrition tests and actually requested "more leafy greens, such as chard, spinach and kale, with their meals," said Suzanne Rauzon, the study's research project director. Typically, kids that age couldn't even identify those vegetables, let alone list them among their favorites, she said.

By the time the students got to middle school, they were more positive about eating in the cafeteria, seemed to have a preference for produce in season and were conscious that their eating choices could help or hurt the environment, according to the report.

Sixty percent of the parents of students enrolled in the stronger food curriculum said school changed their child's knowledge about healthful food choices, compared to 36 percent in the other program. Thirty-five percent as opposed to 16 percent said school improved their child's eating habits.

"It just validates everything we've known to be true," said Alice Waters, who started the Chez Panisse Foundation, which commissioned the study. The Bay Area restaurateur said, although she was not surprised by the findings, "Some people need facts and numbers."

Zenobia Barlow, co-founder and executive director of the Center for Ecoliteracy, said the study proves that it's not enough just to serve healthful food in the school cafeteria. Teaching good nutrition has to be woven into the curriculum.

"Kids at the sixth-grade level have no idea what a calorie is," she said. "But when they're told they'll have to run six laps to work off a bag of Doritos, it starts to change behaviors."

#### Impact on obesity

And changing eating behaviors in this country has become imperative, experts say. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention predicts that because of the country's obesity problem, 1 out of 3 children will have diabetes at some point in life. Only 1 to 2 percent of children in the United States meet the government's recommended dietary guidelines.

Many school nutrition advocates are hoping that UC Berkeley's report is instrumental in helping to pass the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act, legislation that would include a 6-cent increase in the federal reimbursement rate for school lunches, mandatory funding for Farm to School programs and national nutrition standards for food sold on campus.

"It's important that we demonstrate around the country how powerful these ideas are," said Waters. "We put physical education into the core curriculum under the Kennedy administration. Now more than ever before, we have to worry about our children's welfare."

*E-mail Stacy Finz at [sfinz@sfchronicle.com](mailto:sfinz@sfchronicle.com).*

(C) San Francisco Chronicle 2010