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San Mateo County students take part in farm project

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For the San Mateo County Times

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In the age of processed vending machine fare, supermarket giants and climbing childhood obesity rates, farming can seem like an ancient art.

But county officials are working to make hands-on agricultural learning part of the lesson plan for fourth- and fifth-grade students throughout San Mateo County.

Within the Cabrillo Unified School District, agricultural studies have already taken root among many students. This year at Hatch and Farallone View elementary schools, students are participating in health and environmental lessons and activities as part of what's known as the HEAL Project, which stands for Health, Environment, Agriculture and Learning.

Students who participate in the nonprofit HEAL Project plant fruits and vegetables in a campus garden, prepare salads and stir-fry for the class and sell produce at farmers markets. One highlight is a semiannual trek to a farm where students plant pumpkin seeds in the spring and return to harvest the gourds in the fall.

Now the San Mateo County Health System has allotted \$70,000 to the HEAL Project to fund similar

opportunities for up to 300 students within the county. David Lea of Cabrillo Farms has volunteered 2 acres of his Moss Beach land for the cause.

Dr. Scott Morrow, the county's chief health officer, said the Health System began the collaboration to increase garden-based learning in the classroom.

"I chose HEAL because they know how to incorporate it into the

curriculum," Morrow said. "I wanted to expand the influence from the coast to the Bayside."

The opportunity is open to all fourth- and fifth-grade students in the county, whether they're from a public or private school.

It operates on a first-come, first-served basis with an emphasis on including lower-income students, according to Kim Borick, director of the HEAL Project.

"Schools that have a high percentage of low-income students are part of our focus," Borick said. "Because we find that they are the population with less exposure to fresh fruits and vegetables and higher rates of obesity-related health issues."

Over the summer, a small group of HEAL students began planting on the 2 acres set aside for the project. They will come back to harvest their organic pumpkins, Brussels sprouts and tomatoes during the fall season. Other schools are invited to do the same with a two-part field trip that includes planting and harvesting.

Borick said letters notifying principals of the opportunity were issued to county schools a couple of months ago and will be reissued this month. She said there has been some interest but no definite takers yet.



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A big portion of the Health System's funding will go toward sponsoring the farm coordinator and instructor, Chris Beetley-Hagler, who will work with teachers to tailor the lesson to whatever the students have been learning in class.

"It's full of education that can go all different directions," Borick said "We want to customize for each teacher."

Beetley-Hagler said he's excited to take part in a program that promotes healthful eating and appreciation for the environment.

"I think it's really, really awesome they're focused on health and how that relates with the way we grow food," he said. "It's so much more diverse than physical personal health."

And if all goes well, Borick and Morrow hope to expand the program to include more students.

"I see this going on for a long, long time -- hopefully forever," Morrow said. "These kids will be making the environmental decisions in the next decades."

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