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Kids Farmers Markets have youngsters eating well



Robert Nesbitt, with his mom Tasha Brown, buys some apples from Melissa Gjerde at Whitehead Elementary School's Kids Farmers Market. Sue Cockrell/Enterprise photo

By Anne Ternus-Bellamy

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April Vargas loves the Kids Farmers Market that takes place on Friday afternoons when class lets out at Whitehead Elementary School in Woodland.

She loves using “funny money” to buy fresh fruits and vegetables, to sample some tasty produce and to try her hand at a game or two.

In fact, when her dad had to pick her up right after school one recent Friday, and she didn't get to participate, April was mad, said her mom, Lupita Vargas.

And this from a little girl who was never particularly fond of fruits and vegetables.

“But she just loves it,” Lupita Vargas said. “She loves coming.”

April’s a lot more willing to eat her fruits and vegetables, too. And that free 10-pound bag of fresh produce she gets to take home to her family every Friday?

“That’s really great,” her mom said. “A little bit of help goes a long way.”

A little bit of help for a whole lot of families is what the Kids Farmers Markets provide, thanks to the Yolo Food Bank.

The markets — which take place weekly at four schools in West Sacramento, Winters, Woodland and Esparto — now serve more than 1,200 children, each of whom is taking home at least 10 pounds of fresh produce for free every week.

And this isn’t just any produce either — it’s everything from heirloom tomatoes to crisp apples, peppers to sweet potatoes, most of it organic and locally grown. Purchased at the market, that same produce being toted home by each child would cost upwards of \$20 per bag.

The markets are taking place at schools with at least 75 percent participation in free and reduced-price meal programs, indicating high need for access to food like this.

Whitehead was the site of the very first Kids Farmer Market in the spring of 2012.

Food Bank executive director Kevin Sanchez said Whitehead’s principal, Maria Lewis, “was the first to bite,” when the Food Bank began contacting local schools about a pilot project.

That pilot project ran for eight weeks and was big success, Sanchez said, leading to the expansion to four schools that host the weekly markets throughout the school year.

Lewis is a big fan.

“It’s wonderful,” she said. “We are so pleased we can offer this.”

Lewis said she loves that her students are being exposed to lots of healthy food choices and trying foods they’ve never had before. They even take home a new recipe every week “and they tell me they try them at home,” she said.

About three-fourths of Whitehead’s student body participates, Lewis said, though the markets are open to all students.

All the kids farmers markets are set up like a traditional farmers market, complete with tables laden with seasonal fruits and vegetables.

As they are released from their classrooms, students begin lining up with their canvas shopping bags and receive “funny money” for their purchases, then move from table to table selecting their produce.

One recent Friday at Whitehead, high winds led organizers to skip the funny money part and have kids just select food from each table.

The first table that day featured celery, with Melissa Gjerde on hand to assist the kids. An environmental policy major at UC Davis, Gjerde said it was the first time she’d worked at the kids farmers market and she was thrilled to be there.

“It’s incredible,” she said. “We’re actually making an impact here.”

The kids accept their celery — some telling Gjerde they planned to put peanut butter on it — and then move on to the next table. That day there were sweet potatoes, beets, apples, green bell peppers and tomatoes — both heirloom and cherry varieties — to choose from.

Local farmers had provided the bell peppers and beets, while the rest of the produce came from other California farms.

“We have strong relationships with local farmers,” said Amanda McCarthy, director of programs for the Food Bank.

That relationship — along with grant funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture — make the Kids Farmers Market possible. Even during the summer, the Food Bank was able to continue the program, which was a good thing given the greater food insecurity that exists when low-income children aren’t receiving free or reduced-price meals at school.

“We had a huge turnout,” Sanchez said of the summer Kids Farmers Markets.

Good food, too.

“We had beautiful stuff,” he said. “The farms were constantly calling us, offering (produce).”

The markets aren’t just about getting healthy food into the hands and mouths of children, of course. Education is an important component of the markets, with volunteers reminding kids of the nutrition in fruits and vegetables.

“These make your bones strong,” one volunteer could be heard telling students at Whitehead.

“These are great for your eyes,” said another.

Of course, getting kids to actually try the foods is another matter.

Sanchez recalled one market where sweet red peppers were available but the kids were all hesitant to try them, assuming they were hot peppers.

Once they saw adults happily eating them, though, they gave them a try.

Having enough adults on hand for the markets is key. Thankfully, UC Davis provides many volunteers, from sorority members to nutrition students.

Kimberly Prado of the UCD Nutrition Education Program was on hand at Whitehead talking to the students about root vegetables and helping them with an interactive game that required matching different vegetables with plants.

Then she offered them samples of vegetable chips, explaining that they were made from root vegetables.

By then, the kids had made the circuit of tables and their bags were full of fresh produce as well as a recipe for stuffed bell peppers.

“It would be easy to just fill a bag and put it out there for the kids to take, but it wouldn’t be the same,” Sanchez noted.

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