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EARTH TALK

From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine

Dear EarthTalk: How can we get schools to offer healthier and more eco-friendly cafeteria food to our kids? I don't have time to bag a healthy lunch every day. -- Leslie Morris, Richmond, VA

Now that many schools have stopped selling sodas and other unhealthy vending machine items to their students, improving the nutritional quality of cafeteria food is on the agenda of many parents and school administrators. And luckily for the environment, healthier food usually means greener food.

Some forward-thinking schools are leading the charge by sourcing their cafeteria food from local farms and producers. This saves money and also cuts back on the pollution and global warming impacts associated with transporting food long distances. And since many local producers are turning to organic growing methods, local food usually means fewer pesticides in kids' school lunches.

Alarmed by childhood obesity statistics and the prevalence of unhealthy foods offered to students in schools, the Center for Food and Justice (CFJ) in 2000 spearheaded the national Farm to School lunch program. The program connects schools with local farms to provide healthy cafeteria food while also supporting local farmers. Participating schools not only obtain food locally, they incorporate nutrition-based curriculum and provide students with learning opportunities through visits to the local farms.

Farm to School programs now operate in 19 states and in several hundred school districts. CFJ recently received significant support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to expand the program to more states and districts. The group's website (link below) is loaded with resources to help schools get started.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) also runs a Small Farms/School Meals program that boasts participation in 400 school districts in 32 states. Interested schools can check out the agency's "Step-by-Step Guide on How to Bring Small Farms and Local Schools

Together," which is available free online.

Other schools have taken the plunge in their own unique ways. In Berkeley, California, noted chef Alice Waters holds cooking classes in which students grow and prepare local organic fruits and vegetables for their peers' school lunch menus. And as documented in the film, "Super Size Me," Wisconsin's Appleton Central Alternative School hired a local organic bakery that helped transform Appleton's cafeteria fare from offerings heavy on meat and junk food to predominantly whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables.

Of course, parents can ensure that their children eat well at school by forgoing the cafeteria offerings altogether and sending their kids to school with healthy bag lunches. For on-the-go parents unable to keep up with a daily lunch making regimen, innovative companies are beginning to sprout up that will do it for you. Kid Chow in San Francisco, Health e-Lunch Kids in Fairfax, Virginia, New York City's KidFresh and Manhattan Beach, California's Brown Bag Naturals will deliver organic and natural food lunches to your kids for about three times the price of a cafeteria lunch. But prices should change for the better as the idea catches on and more volume brings costs down.

CONTACTS: Farm to Schools, www.farmentoschool.org; USDA Small Farms/School Meals Initiative, www.fns.usda.gov/cnd/Lunch/Downloadable/small.pdf; Kid Chow, www.kid-chow.com, Brown Bag Naturals, brownbagnaturals.com; Health e-Lunch Kids, healthelunchkids.com; Kidfresh, kidfresh.com.

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