



Tulare's Earlimart School District Leverages Kitchen Facilities to Address Food Insecurity

Healthy Communities Success Story

An estimated 57,000 adults in Tulare County experienced food insecurity – the lack of adequate food or income to ensure a balanced diet – during the recent recession, according to a 2012 policy brief by the UCLA Center for Health and Policy Research.

The Tulare County food bank currently feeds a quarter of the population in the region.

Economic recovery from the recession is slow, and many Tulare County families are still struggling to balance the cost of food with other basic living expenses. Because nutritious food is so difficult to acquire, many parents rely on school lunches to feed their children.



This summary is one of a four-part series of healthy community success stories, created by the Local Government Commission through funding from the California Endowment. A very special thanks to Susan Elizabeth and James Beach for contributing content for this summary.

The Action Taken

The Earlimart School District is located in southern Tulare County, about 40 miles north of Bakersfield and about 70 miles south of Fresno. The district serves a total of 2,000 students at four schools. Food insecurity is a reality for most students there: Across the district, 95% of children qualify for free school meals.

Wellness Policy

In response to the growing need to address health issues faced by its students, the district's School Board approved a wellness policy in 2011 that provides clear guidelines for creating a healthier school environment.

The policy sets beverage standards and eliminates flavored milk and electrolyte replacement beverages in middle schools; requires 5% of produce purchased and served in the district must be locally grown; and outlines nutrition standards for school fundraising.

It also requires that nutrition education be incorporated into physical education class curriculum at all schools, and promotes increased physical activity during and after school.

The policy established a wellness committee, through which Earlimart School District and other stakeholders collaborate to tackle food system challenges. Members include the district superintendent and food services director, nonprofit representatives, teachers and parent liaisons.



The committee is championing ways to better activate district resources, such as joint use of school kitchens as workforce development tools and economic development engines.

Teaching Good Eating

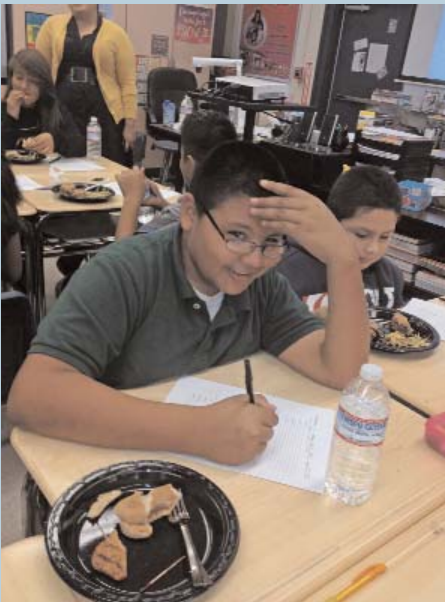
They are also considering ways of using school kitchens as teaching facilities. There is a need to help parents understand how to better feed their children – the committee is discussing how the district might offer food procurement, food preparation, and cooking classes to address this need.

Wellness committee member Jason Beach, trained in culinary school and a well-traveled chef by trade, is Earlimart's food services director. He is focused on food quality, and believes the healthiest and most appetizing food doesn't come in a plastic wrapper.

When he started work in April 2013, he began shifting all school kitchens to scratch cooking, creating meals on-site from basic ingredients rather than simply warming prepared meals.

While Beach has experience working in school districts that take the "meal-in-a-bag" approach, he prefers to incorporate fresh fruits and vegetables into his menus. He set up salads bars at each school.

He partners with Grilda Gomez from University of California Cooperative Extension, who provides nutrition education presentations for students during lunch. Beach is involved in improving the skills of kitchen staff in an industrial context, so local residents are in the position to get better jobs.



An Eye for Value

Beach is extremely particular about food purveyors and the procurement process; he scrutinizes them to ensure that the district gets the best quality product for every dollar of limited funds.

Because of his background in the restaurant industry, he is familiar with the major purveyors' sales approach and offerings. Beach has gone through several different produce companies in the past few months to find who will be most committed and provide the best quality products.

Beach currently oversees catering services using the district's kitchen facilities. His catering business offers a diverse menu including continental breakfast and full, fine dining dinners. Beach is drafting a menu scale brochure to share with the community. The business offers skill building amongst existing staff and employment opportunities for local residents.



A Garden Grows

Beach is also organizing a garden program, now in its planning stages and expected to be in operation next spring. The school district is partnering with local business owners and working on grant writing to support the program.

District staff attended the Master Gardeners Workshop offered through the University of California, and plan to tie that into their nutrition education plan.

The program envisions it will also grow into a community garden program, providing local families in need with fresh fruits and vegetables.

Better Prices, Better Food

The local food movement is gaining ground in Tulare County and in the greater Central Valley. Earlimart, along with 40 other California school districts, is part of a food cooperative that leverages purchasing power as



an association to obtain lower prices on quality, local food.

The cooperative, a legal entity called Partners in Nutrition Cooperative (PinCo), was established in 1988. Earlimart became a member three years ago.

PinCo ensures that member districts receive quality products at the lowest prices through competitive bidding, volume buying and single-drop orders; membership optimizes efficiency in purchasing, warehousing, and distribution through centralized management and control.

Better pricing for larger districts trickles down to smaller districts in the cooperative. Corporate sellers are forced to set up competitive bids so they can obtain contracts with a group of districts, rather than individual districts. The local procurement of food meets the community's needs while increasing the quality of food, reducing carbon footprints, and supporting local jobs.

The Results

Within one month of being hired, Chef Jason Beach released the first student survey of the school food program.

This survey asked students what they liked and disliked about the program, and what they wanted to see on the menu. He received hundreds of surveys back from the students.

“They are excited to know someone cares about what they eat,” Beach said.

The district is engaging the community through health-related events; they organized a wellness, health, and safety fair, in partnership with the sheriff, fire department, food purveyors, and the local community. District staff passed out fresh fruit during the fair and provided education regarding healthy eating habits.

The school district is looking at its food services as a business, instead of a subsidized program. It is a new way of thinking that brings a business edge to schools. There are numerous advantages to having staff view students as customers and what they are providing as a product.

“There is a stigma attached to children who have to take advantage of free or reduced-price meals. That stigma is reflected in the services they receive and the food itself,” said wellness committee member Susan Elizabeth from the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program.

“The stigma even effects staff’s perception of themselves. These new efforts help staff feel ownership over the product they create.”

photos: a recent recipe tasting at Earlimart Middle School

Learn more about it...

- California Food Policy Advocates • cfpa.net
- California Project Lean • californiaprojectlean.org
- Earlimart School District • earlimart.org
- Kidsdata.org • “Student Eligibility to Receive Free or Reduced Price School Meals: 2012”
- KQED, “Hunger in the Valley of Plenty” • kqed.org



Lessons Learned

Effective food system improvement efforts are contingent upon strong relationships with community leaders and institutions.

As food service director, Beach works in close partnership with district staff and students. He is a visible presence in each of the District’s kitchens, often helping to cook and serve meals. If teachers have an issue, he encourages them to talk to him directly and works to resolve those issues swiftly. He quickly garnered trust.

In some smaller, rural communities like those within the Earlimart School District, momentum around good ideas can build more quickly because people know their neighbors. If these communities are helped to understand the underlying concepts of food insecurity and to develop a vision to address it, successes can sometimes be achieved more readily than in an urban context.

Schools districts like Earlimart are learning that to view existing assets in a different light can yield positive results. Schools are becoming the new community centers. The idea of sole-purpose school facilities is no longer feasible. There is a system in place to provide free meals to children – it also offers an opportunity to provide education and skill building.

Efforts in Earlimart and neighboring school districts to leverage existing assets are the seeds of a more developed way of enhancing the workforce. A more skilled workforce will stand a better chance at weathering challenges such as recessions, and will be less likely to experience food insecurity. As demonstrated by Earlimart’s efforts to help create healthier schools and students, generating hope has a ripple effect.