

The Farm to Preschool Program

Program Information

Introduction

The Farm to Preschool Program at the Urban & Environmental Policy Institute (UEPI), Occidental College, is designed to influence early childhood eating habits, which is crucial to maintaining a healthy weight and preventing childhood obesity. The program includes facilitating the purchasing of farm-fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables as part of the preschool menu, culturally- and age-appropriate nutrition education, and helps establish healthy food policies which can increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables at preschools, influence life-long eating patterns, and improve the overall health and well-being of young children and families. The program also seeks to create greater awareness of, and increase access to, fresh fruits and vegetables within the home for the benefit of the entire family and the community. As a natural expansion of the national farm to school model, this program supports local farmers and the economy through farm and market-based purchasing.

Program Components

Food Purchasing and Preparation

From 2009-2011, UEPI worked with participating preschool site administrators and food vendors to determine the best mode of purchasing locally sourced fruits and vegetables for meals, snacks, taste tests and educational activities. UEPI collaborated with contracted vendors to incorporate locally grown fruits and vegetables into meals and snacks and facilitated contact with local farmers and farmers' markets to arrange direct purchases with schools. This program does not aim to eliminate existing food contracts, but to find the best means for improving in-school nutrition with seasonal and fresh items most compatible with the site's resources.

Nutrition Education

To complement the introduction of more and varied fresh fruits and vegetables in the classroom, participating sites conduct nutrition education in their classes through a UEPI-modified nutrition curriculum (*Harvest of the Month*), and through continual role-modeling and positive reinforcement in the classroom. In-class activities involve reading books about fruits and vegetables, conducting art, science and gardening-based activities, as well as holding monthly taste tests and interactive snack preparations. UEPI can provide technical assistance and additional curricula for sites interested in starting a garden or other complementary activities such as composting. UEPI recommends each classroom have it's own copy of educational materials and that sites train teachers with the resources. UEPI can offer teacher training resources and technical assistance with the materials. Curriculum resources are currently available online, free of charge:

<http://ourcommunityourkids.org/domains--committees/early-childhood/farm-to-preschool-.aspx>

Parent Workshops

As a continuation of the child nutrition curriculum, it is vital to address the needs of parents and other family members. In order for sustainable dietary changes at the preschool level, caregivers need to be engaged and educated as well. Two or more workshops per year have been organized and implemented by UEPI, with assistance from the preschool site. The content of parent workshops vary, and each site worked directly with UEPI staff to design workshops specifically meeting the needs of their parents. These workshops include cooking demonstrations, taste tests,

information on accessing local farmers' markets or CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) programs, topic-driven nutrition education, and invited speakers such as promotoras (community-based nutrition educators) and master gardeners. A parent workshop kit is being developed on topics such as reading nutrition labels, portion control, healthy snacking, healthy shopping on a budget, organic foods, and home gardening. Most handouts are offered in both English and Spanish. Participating sites are encouraged to arrange field trips to local farmers' markets with both parents and children.

National Website

A website is in the process of being developed which will serve as a clearinghouse of preschool resources, materials and updates provided by farm to preschool-type programs around the country (www.farmtopreschool.org). This website will be modeled after the National Farm to School Network website (www.farmtoschool.org) and is anticipated to be launched in Summer 2011.

Preschool Wellness Policy

UEPI, as well as other organizations, recognize that healthy practices in preschools are difficult to implement without an existing wellness policy. Several California-based agencies have created preschool wellness policy templates including nutritional and physical activity guidelines, and UEPI is working towards creating a model that will also include guidelines for implementing and maintaining in-class nutrition education and preschool gardens.

Demonstration Sites and Workshop Trainings

In the spring of 2011, UEPI conducted two demonstration training workshops with The Magnolia Place Family Center in Los Angeles and with North County Community Services Thunder CDC in Oceanside (northern San Diego County). These sites will serve as program training hubs in their respective counties for other preschools, school districts, and family child care providers interested in adopting the Farm to Preschool program.

Evaluation

As an integral component to the program, sites participated in an extensive two-year evaluation process to document the success and barriers of the program, by measuring outcomes such as increased consumption, knowledge, and preference for fresh fruits and vegetables among preschoolers and their families. It is through evaluation measures that this program is able to serve as a "best practices" model for others to utilize. Evaluation was organized and administrated by UEPI, which included pre/post tests with preschoolers, observations, and surveys on nutrition and eating habits with parents. All forms were succinct and offered in Spanish for parents. UEPI collaborated with sites to improve project components as they were being implemented, as part of process evaluation measures.

For more information, please contact:

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